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Collected Works

P. G. WODEHOUSE by LOW

P. G. WODEHOUSE

Love Among the Chickens

Eggs, Beans and Crumpets

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Love Among the Chickens

DEDICATION

TO W. TOWNEND

DEAR BILL,—

I have never been much of a lad for the

TO——

But For Whose Sympathy and Encouragement
This Book
Would Never Have Been Written

type of dedication. It sounds so weak-minded. But in the case of Love Among The Chickens it is unavoidable. It was not so much that you sympathised and encouraged—where you really came out strong was that you gave me the stuff. I like people who sympathise with me. I am grateful to those who encourage me. But the man to whom I raise the Wodehouse hat—owing to the increased cost of living, the same old brown one I had last year—it is being complained of on all sides, but the public must bear it like men till the straw hat season comes round—I say, the man to whom I raise this venerable relic is the man who gives me the material.

Sixteen years ago, my William, when we were young and spritely lads; when you were a tricky centre-forward and I a fast bowler; when your head was covered with hair and my list of "Hobbies" in Who's Who included Boxing; I received from you one morning about thirty closely-written foolscap pages, giving me the details of your friend ——'s adventures on his Devonshire chicken farm. Round these I wove as funny a plot as I could, but the book stands or falls by the stuff you gave me about "Ukridge"—the things that actually happened.

You will notice that I have practically re-written the book. There was some pretty bad work in it, and it had "dated". As an instance of the way in which the march of modern civilisation has left the 1906 edition behind, I may mention that on page twenty-one I was able to make Ukridge speak of selling eggs at six for fivepence!

Yours ever,

P. G. WODEHOUSE.

London, 1920.

1

A Letter with a Postscript

"A GENTLEMAN called to see you when you were out last night, sir," said Mrs. Medley, my landlady, removing the last of the breakfast things.

"Yes?" I said, in my affable way.

"A gentleman," said Mrs. Medley meditatively, "with a very powerful voice."

"Caruso?"

"Sir?"

"I said, did he leave a name?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ukridge."

"Oh, my sainted aunt!"

"Sir!"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Medley, withdrawing from the presence.

Ukridge! Oh, hang it! I had not met him for years, and, glad as I am, as a general thing, to see the friends of my youth when they drop in for a chat, I doubted whether I was quite equal to Ukridge at the moment. A stout fellow in both the physical and moral sense of the words, he was a trifle too jumpy for a man of my cloistered and intellectual life, especially as just now I was trying to plan out a new novel, a tricky job demanding complete quiet and seclusion. It had always been my experience that, when Ukridge was around, things began to happen swiftly and violently, rendering meditation impossible. Ukridge was the sort of man who asks you out to dinner, borrows the money from you to pay the bill, and winds up the evening by embroiling you in a fight with a cabman. I have gone to Covent Garden balls with Ukridge, and found myself legging it down Henrietta Street in the grey dawn, pursued by infuriated costermongers.

I wondered how he had got my address, and on that problem

light was immediately cast by Mrs. Medley, who returned, bearing an envelope.

"It came by the morning post, sir, but it was left at Number Twenty by mistake."

"Oh, thank you."

"Thank *you*, sir," said Mrs. Medley.

I recognised the handwriting. The letter, which bore a Devonshire postmark, was from an artist friend of mine, one Lickford, who was at present on a sketching tour in the west. I had seen him off at Waterloo a week before, and I remember that I had walked away from the station wishing that I could summon up the energy to pack and get off to the country somewhere. I hate London in July.

The letter was a long one, but it was the postscript which interested me most.

". . . By the way, at Yeovil I ran into an old friend of ours, Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge, of all people. As large as life—quite six foot two, and tremendously filled out. I thought he was abroad. The last I heard of him was that he had started for Buenos Ayres in a cattle ship, with a borrowed pipe by way of luggage. It seems he has been in England for some time. I met him in the refreshment-room at Yeovil Station. I was waiting for a down train; he had changed on his way to town. As I opened the door, I heard a huge voice entreating the lady behind the bar to 'put it in a pewter'; and there was S. F. U. in a villainous old suit of grey flannels (I'll swear it was the one he had on last time I saw him) with pince-nez tacked on to his ears with ginger-beer wire as usual, and a couple of inches of bare neck showing between the bottom of his collar and the top of his coat—you remember how he could never get a stud to do its work. He also wore a mackintosh, though it was a blazing day.

"He greeted me with effusive shouts. Wouldn't hear of my standing the racket. Insisted on being host. When we had finished, he fumbled in his pockets, looked pained and surprised, and drew me aside. 'Look here, Licky, old horse,' he said, 'you know I never borrow money. It's against my prin-

ciples. But I *must* have a couple of bob. Can you, my dear fellow, oblige me with a couple of bob till next Tuesday? I'll tell you what I'll do. (In a voice full of emotion.) I'll let you have this (producing a beastly little threepenny bit with a hole in it which he had probably picked up in the street) until I can pay you back. This is of more value to me than I can well express, Licky, my boy. A very, very dear friend gave it to me when we parted, years ago . . . It's a wrench . . . Still—no, no . . . You must take it, you must take it. Licky, old man, shake hands, old horse. Shake hands, my boy.' He then tottered to the bar, deeply moved, and paid up out of the five shillings which he had made it as an after-thought. He asked after you, and said you were one of the noblest men on earth. I gave him your address, not being able to get out of it, but if I were you I should fly while there is yet time."

It seemed to me that the advice was good and should be followed. I needed a change of air. London may have suited Doctor Johnson, but in the summer time it is not for the ordinary man. What I wanted, to enable me to give the public of my best (as the reviewer of a weekly paper, dealing with my last work, had expressed a polite hope that I would continue to do) was a little haven in the country somewhere.

I rang the bell.

"Sir?" said Mrs. Medley.

"I'm going away for a bit," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know where. I'll send you the address, so that you can forward letters."

"Yes, sir."

"And, if Mr. Ukridge calls again . . ."

At this point a thunderous knocking on the front door interrupted me. Something seemed to tell me who was at the end of that knocker. I heard Mrs. Medley's footsteps pass along the hall. There was the click of the latch. A volume of sound rushed up the stairs.

"Is Mr. Garnet in? Where is he? Show me the old horse.

Where is the man of wrath? Exhibit the son of Belial."

There followed a violent crashing on the stairs, shaking the house.

"Garnet! Where are you, laddie? Garnet!! GARNET!!!!!"

Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge was in my midst.

2

Mr. and Mrs. S. F. Ukridge

I HAVE often thought that Who's Who, though a bulky and well-meaning volume, omits too many of England's greatest men. It is not comprehensive enough. I am in it, nestling among the G's:

> "GARNET, Jeremy, o.s. of late Henry Garnet, vicar of Much Middlefold, Salop; author. Publications: 'The Outsider,' 'The Manœuvres of Arthur.' Hobbies: Cricket, football, swimming, golf. Clubs: Arts."

But if you search among the U's for UKRIDGE, Stanley Featherstonehaugh, details of whose tempestuous career would make really interesting reading, you find no mention of him. It seems unfair, though I imagine Ukridge bears it with fortitude. That much-enduring man has had a lifetime's training in bearing things with fortitude.

He seemed in his customary jovial spirits now, as he dashed into the room, clinging on to the pince-nez which even ginger-beer wire rarely kept stable for two minutes together.

"My dear old man," he shouted, springing at me and seizing my hand in a grip like the bite of a horse. "How *are* you, old buck? This is good. By Jove, this is fine, what?"

He dashed to the door and looked out.

"Come on, Millie! Pick up the waukeesis. Here's old Garnet, looking just the same as ever. Devilish handsome fellow! You'll be glad you came when you see him. Beats the Zoo hollow!"

There appeared round the corner of Ukridge a young woman. She paused in the doorway and smiled pleasantly.

"Garny, old horse," said Ukridge with some pride, "this is *her*! The pride of the home. Companion of joys and sorrows and all the rest of it. In fact," in a burst of confidence, "my wife."

I bowed awkwardly. The idea of Ukridge married was something too overpowering to be readily assimilated.

"Buck up, old horse," said Ukridge, encouragingly. He had a painful habit of addressing all and sundry by that title. In his schoolmaster days—at one period of his vivid career he and I had been colleagues on the staff of a private school—he had made use of it while interviewing the parents of new pupils, and the latter had gone away, as a rule, with a feeling that this must be either the easy manner of Genius or due to alcohol, and hoping for the best. He also used it to perfect strangers in the streets, and on one occasion had been heard to address a bishop by that title, rendering that dignitary, as Mr. Baboo Jaberjee would put it, *sotto voce* with gratification. "Surprised to find me married, what? Garny, old boy,"—sinking his voice to a whisper almost inaudible on the other side of the street—"take my tip. Go and jump off the dock yourself. You'll feel another man. Give up this bachelor business. It's a mug's game. I look on you bachelors as excrescences on the social system. I regard you, old man, purely and simply as a wart. Go and get married, laddie, go and get married. By gad, I've forgotten to pay the cabby. Lend me a couple of bob, Garny old chap."

He was out of the door and on his way downstairs before the echoes of his last remark had ceased to shake the window. I was left to entertain Mrs. Ukridge.

So far her share in the conversation had been confined to the pleasant smile which was apparently her chief form of expression. Nobody talked very much when Ukridge was present. She sat on the edge of the armchair, looking very small and quiet. I was conscious of feeling a benevolent pity for her. If I had been a girl, I would have preferred to marry a volcano. A little of Ukridge, as his former headmaster had once said in a moody, reflective voice, went a very long way. "You and Stanley have known each other a long time, haven't you?" said the object of my commiseration, breaking the silence.

"Yes. Oh yes. Several years. We were masters at the same school."

Mrs. Ukridge leaned forward with round, shining eyes.

"Really? Oh, how nice!" she said ecstatically.

Not yet, to judge from her expression and the tone of her voice, had she found any disadvantages attached to the arduous position of being Mrs. Stanley Ukridge.

"He's a wonderfully versatile man," I said.

"I believe he could do anything."

"He'd have a jolly good try!"

"Have you ever kept fowls?" asked Mrs. Ukridge, with apparent irrelevance.

I had not. She looked disappointed.

"I was hoping you might have had some experience. Stanley, of course, can turn his hand to anything; but I think experience is rather a good thing, don't you?"

"Yes. But . . ."

"I have bought a shilling book called 'Fowls and All About Them', and this week's copy of *C.A.C.*"

"*C.A.C.?*"

"*Chiefly About Chickens.* It's a paper, you know. But it's all rather hard to understand. You see, we . . . but here is Stanley. He will explain the whole thing."

"Well, Garny, old horse," said Ukridge, re-entering the room after another energetic passage of the stairs. "Years since I saw you. Still buzzing along?"

"Still, so to speak, buzzing," I assented.

"I was reading your last book the other day."

"Yes?" I said, gratified. "How did you like it?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, laddie, I didn't get beyond the third page, because the scurvy knave at the bookstall said he wasn't running a free library, and in one way and another there was a certain amount of unpleasantness. Still, it seemed bright and interesting up to page three. But let's settle down and talk business. I've got a scheme for you, Garny old man. Yessir, the idea of a thousand years. Now listen to me for a moment. Let me get a word in edgeways."

He sat down on the table, and dragged up a chair as a leg-rest. Then he took off his pince-nez, wiped them, readjusted the ginger-beer wire behind his ears, and, having hit a brown patch

on the knee of his grey flannel trousers several times, in the apparent hope of removing it, resumed:

"About fowls."

The subject was beginning to interest me. It showed a curious tendency to creep into the conversation of the Ukridge family.

"I want you to give me your undivided attention for a moment. I was saying to my wife, as we came here, 'Garnet's the man! Clever devil, Garnet. Full of ideas.' Didn't I, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"Laddie," said Ukridge impressively, "we are going to keep fowls."

He shifted himself farther on to the table and upset the ink-pot.

"Never mind," he said, it'll soak in. It's good for the texture. Or am I thinking of tobacco-ash on the carpet? Well, never mind. Listen to me! When I said that we were going to keep fowls, I didn't mean in a small, piffling sort of way—two cocks and a couple of hens and a golf-ball for a nest-egg. We are going to do it on a large scale. We are going to run a chicken farm!"

"A chicken farm," echoed Mrs. Ukridge with an affectionate and admiring glance at her husband.

"Ah," I said, feeling my responsibilities as chorus. "A chicken farm."

"I've thought it all over, laddie, and it's as clear as mud. No expenses, large profits, quick returns. Chickens, eggs, and the money streaming in faster than you can bank it. Winter and summer underclothing, my bonny boy, lined with crackling Bradbury's. It's the idea of a lifetime. Now listen to me for a moment. You get your hen——"

"One hen?"

"Call it one for the sake of argument. It makes my calculations clearer. Very well, then. Harriet the hen—you get her. Do you follow me so far?"

"Yes. You get a hen."

"I told you Garnet was a dashed bright fellow," said Ukridge approvingly to his attentive wife. "Notice the way he keeps right after one's ideas? Like a bloodhound. Well, where was I?"

"You'd just got a hen."

"Exactly. The hen. Priscilla the pullet. Well, it lays an egg every day of the week. You sell the eggs, six for half a crown. Keep of hen costs nothing. Profit—at least a couple of bob on every dozen eggs. What do you think of that?"

"I think I'd like to overhaul the figures in case of error."

"Error!" shouted Ukridge, pounding the table till it groaned. "Error? Not a bit of it. Can't you follow a simple calculation like that? Oh, I forgot to say that you get—and here is the nub of the thing—you get your first hen on tick. Anybody will be glad to let you have a hen on tick. Well, then, you let this hen—this first, original hen, this on-tick-hen—you let it set and hatch chickens. Now follow me closely. Suppose you have a dozen hens. Very well, then. When each of the dozen has a dozen chickens, you send the old hens back to the chappies you borrowed them from, with thanks for kind loan; and there you are, starting business with a hundred and forty-four free chickens to your name. And after a bit, when the chickens grow up and begin to lay, all you have to do it to sit back in your chair and endorse the big cheques. Isn't that so, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"We've fixed it all up. Do you know Combe Regis, in Dorsetshire? On the borders of Devon. Bathing. Sea-air. Splendid scenery. Just the place for a chicken farm. A friend of Millie's—girl she knew at school—has lent us a topping old house, with large grounds. All we've got to do is to get in the fowls. I've ordered the first lot. We shall find them waiting for us when we arrive."

"Well," I said, "I'm sure I wish you luck. Mind you let me know how you get on."

"Let you know!" roared Ukridge. "Why, my dear old horse, you're coming with us."

"Am I?" I said blankly.

"Certainly you are. We shall take no refusal. Will we, Millie?"

"No, dear."

"Of course not. No refusal of any sort. Pack up to-night and meet us at Waterloo to-morrow."

"It's awfully good of you . . ."

"Not a bit of it—not a bit of it. This is pure business. I was saying to Millie as we came along that you were the very man for us. A man with your flow of ideas will be invaluable on a chicken farm. Absolutely invaluable. You see," proceeded Ukridge, "I'm one of these practical fellows. The hard-headed type. I go straight ahead, following my nose. What you want in a business of this sort is a touch of the dreamer to help out the practical mind. We look to you for suggestions, laddie. Flashes of inspiration and all that sort of thing. Of course, you take your share of the profits. That's understood. Yes, yes, I must insist. Strict business between friends. Now, taking it that, at a conservative estimate, the net profits for the first fiscal year amount to—five thousand—no, better be on the safe side—say, four thousand five hundred pounds . . . But we'll arrange all that end of it when we get down there. Millie will look after that. She's the secretary of the concern. She's been writing letters to people asking for hens. So you see it's a thoroughly organised business. How many hen-letters did you write last week, old girl?"

"Ten, dear."

Ukridge turned triumphantly to me.

"You hear? Ten. Ten letters asking for hens. That's the way to succeed. Push and enterprise."

"Six of them haven't answered, Stanley, dear, and the rest refused."

"Immaterial," said Ukridge with a grand gesture. "That doesn't matter. The point is that the letters were written. It shows we are solid and practical. Well now, can you get your things ready by to-morrow, Garny old horse?"

Strange how one reaches an epoch-making moment in one's life without recognising it. If I had refused that invitation, I would not have—at any rate, I would have missed a remarkable experience. It is not given to everyone to see Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge manage a chicken farm.

"I was thinking of going somewhere where I could get some golf," I said undecidedly.

"Combe Regis is just the place for you, then. Perfect hot-bed of golf. Full of the finest players. Can't throw a brick without

hitting an amateur champion. Grand links at the top of the hill not half a mile from the farm. Bring your clubs. You'll be able to play in the afternoons. Get through serious work by lunch time."

"You know," I said, "I am absolutely inexperienced as regards fowls. I just know enough to help myself to bread sauce when I see one, but no more."

"Excellent! You're just the man. You will bring to the work a mind unclouded by theories. You will act solely by the light of your intelligence. And you've got lots of that. That novel of yours showed the most extraordinary intelligence—at least as far as that blighter at the bookstall would let me read. I wouldn't have a professional chicken farmer about the place if he paid to come. If he applied to me, I should simply send him away. Natural intelligence is what we want. Then we can rely on you?"

"Very well," I said slowly. "It's very kind of you to ask me."

"Business, laddie, pure business. Very well, then. We shall catch the eleven-twenty at Waterloo. Don't miss it. Look out for me on the platform. If I see you first, I'll shout."

3

Waterloo Station, Some Fellow-Travellers, and a Girl with Brown Hair

THE austerity of Waterloo Station was lightened on the following morning at ten minutes to eleven, when I arrived to catch the train to Combe Regis, by several gleams of sunshine and a great deal of bustle and activity on the various platforms. A porter took my suitcase and golf-clubs, and arranged an assignation on Number 6 platform. I bought my ticket, and made my way to the bookstall, where, in the interests of trade, I inquired in a loud and penetrating voice if they had got Jeremy Garnet's "Manœuvres of Arthur." Being informed that they had not, I clicked my tongue reproachfully, advised them to order in a supply, as the demand was likely to be large, and spent a couple of shillings on a magazine and some weekly papers. Then, with ten minutes to spare, I went off in search of Ukridge.

I found him on platform six. The eleven-twenty was already alongside, and presently I observed my porter cleaving a path towards me with the suitcase and golf-bag.

"Here you are!" shouted Ukridge vigorously. "Good for you. Thought you were going to miss it."

I shook hands with the smiling Mrs. Ukridge.

"I've got a carriage and collared two corner seats. Millie goes down in another. She doesn't like the smell of smoke when she's travelling. Hope we get the carriage to ourselves. Devil of a lot of people here this morning. Still, the more people there are in the world, the more eggs we shall sell. I can see with half an eye that all these blighters are confirmed egg-eaters. Get in, sonnie. I'll just see the missis into her carriage, and come back to you."

I entered the compartment, and stood at the door, looking out in the faint hope of thwarting an invasion of fellow-travellers. Then I withdrew my head suddenly and sat down. An elderly

gentleman, accompanied by a pretty girl, was coming towards me. It was not this type of fellow-traveller whom I had hoped to keep out. I had noticed the girl at the booking office. She had waited by the side of the queue while the elderly gentleman struggled gamely for the tickets, and I had had plenty of opportunity of observing her appearance. I had debated with myself whether her hair should rightly be described as brown or golden. I had finally decided on brown. Once only had I met her eyes, and then only for an instant. They might be blue. They might be grey. I could not be certain. Life is full of these problems.

"This seems tolerably empty, my dear Phyllis," said the elderly gentleman, coming to the door of the compartment and looking in. "You're sure you don't object to a smoking-carriage?"

"Oh no, father. Not a bit."

"Then I think . . ." said the elderly gentleman, getting in.

The inflection of his voice suggested the Irishman. It was not a brogue. There were no strange words. But the general effect was Irish.

"That's good," he said, settling himself and pulling out a cigar case.

The bustle on the platform had increased momentarily, until now, when, from the snorting of the engine, it seemed likely that the train might start at any minute, the crowd's excitement was extreme. Shrill cries echoed down the platform. Lost sheep, singly and in companies, rushed to and fro, peering eagerly into carriages in search for seats. Piercing voices ordered unknown "Tommies" and "Ernies" to "keep by aunty, now." Just as Ukridge returned, that *sauve qui peut* of the railway crowd, the dreaded "Get in anywhere" began to be heard, and the next moment an avalanche of warm humanity poured into the carriage.

The newcomers consisted of a middle-aged lady, addressed as Aunty, very stout and clad in a grey alpaca dress, skin-tight; a youth called Albert, not, it was to appear, a sunny child; a niece of some twenty years, stolid and seemingly without interest in life, and one or two other camp-followers and retainers.

Ukridge slipped into his corner, adroitly foiling Albert, who had made a dive in that direction. Albert regarded him fixedly and

reproachfully for a space, then sank into the seat beside me and began to chew something that smelt of aniseed.

Aunty, meanwhile, was distributing her substantial weight evenly between the feet of the Irish gentleman and those of his daughter, as she leaned out of the window to converse with a lady friend in a straw hat and hair-curlers, accompanied by three dirty and frivolous boys. It was, she stated, lucky that she had caught the train. I could not agree with her. The girl with the brown hair and the eyes that were neither blue or grey was bearing the infliction, I noticed, with angelic calm. She even smiled. This was when the train suddenly moved off with a jerk, and Aunty, staggering back, sat down on the bag of food which Albert had placed on the seat beside him.

"Clumsy!" observed Albert tersely.

"*Albert*, you mustn't speak to Aunty so!"

"Wodyer want to sit on my bag for then?" said Albert disagreeably.

They argued the point. Argument in no wise interfered with Albert's power of mastication. The odour of aniseed became more and more painful. Ukridge had lighted a cigar, and I understood why Mrs. Ukridge preferred to travel in another compartment, for

"*In his hand he bore the brand*
Which none but he might smoke."

I looked across the carriage stealthily to see how the girl was enduring this combination of evils, and noticed that she had begun to read. And as she put the book down to look out of the window, I saw with a thrill that trickled like warm water down my spine that her book was "The Manœuvres of Arthur". I gasped. That a girl should look as pretty as that and at the same time have the rare intelligence to read Me . . . well, it seemed an almost superhuman combination of the excellencies. And more devoutly than ever I cursed in my heart these intrusive outsiders who had charged in at the last moment and destroyed for ever my chance of making this wonderful girl's acquaintance. But for them, we might have become intimate in the first half hour. As it was,

what were we? Ships that pass in the night! She would get out at some beastly wayside station, and vanish from my life without my ever having even spoken to her.

Aunty, meanwhile, having retired badly worsted from her encounter with Albert, who showed a skill in logomachy that marked him out as a future Labour member, was consoling herself with meat sandwiches. The niece was demolishing sausage rolls. The atmosphere of the carriage was charged with a blend of odours, topping all Ukridge's cigar, now in full blast.

The train raced on towards the sea. It was a warm day, and a torpid peace began to settle down upon the carriage. Ukridge had thrown away the stump of his cigar, and was now leaning back with his mouth open and his eyes shut. Aunty, still clutching a much-bitten section of a beef sandwich, was breathing heavily and swaying from side to side. Albert and the niece were dozing, Albert's jaws working automatically, even in sleep.

"What's your book, me dear?" asked the Irishman.

" 'The Manœuvres of Arthur', father. By Jeremy Garnet."

I would not have believed without the evidence of my ears that my name could possibly have sounded so musical.

"Molly McEachern gave it to me when I left the Abbey. She keeps a shelf of books for her guests when they are going away. Books that she considers rubbish, and doesn't want, you know."

I hated Miss McEachern without further evidence.

"And what do you think of it?"

"I like it," said the girl decidedly. The carriage swam before my eyes. "I think it is very clever."

What did it matter after that that the ass in charge of the Waterloo bookstall had never heard of "The Manœuvres of Arthur", and that my publishers, whenever I slunk in to ask how it was selling, looked at me with a sort of grave, paternal pity and said that it had not really "begun to move"? Anybody can write one of those rotten popular novels which appeal to the unthinking public, but it takes a man of intellect and refinement and taste and all that sort of thing to turn out something that will be approved of by a girl like this.

"I wonder who Jeremy Garnet is," she said. "I've never

heard of him before. I imagine him rather an old young man, probably with an eye-glass, and conceited. And I should think he didn't know many girls. At least if he thinks Pamela an ordinary sort of girl. She's a cr-r-eature," said Phyllis emphatically.

This was a blow to me. I had always looked on Pamela as a well-drawn character, and a very attractive, kittenish little thing at that. That scene between her and the curate in the conservatory . . . And when she talks to Arthur at the meet of the Blankshires . . . I was sorry she did not like Pamela. Somehow it lowered Pamela in my estimation.

"But I like Arthur," said the girl.

This was better. A good chap, Arthur—a very complete and thoughtful study of myself. If she liked Arthur, why, then it followed . . . but what was the use? I should never get a chance of speaking to her. We were divided by a great gulf of Aunties and Alberts and meat sandwiches.

The train was beginning to slow down. Signs of returning animation began to be noticeable among the sleepers. Aunty's eyes opened, stared vacantly round, closed, and reopened. The niece woke, and started instantly to attack a sausage roll. Albert and Ukridge slumbered on.

A whistle from the engine, and the train drew up at a station. Looking out, I saw that it was Yeovil. There was a general exodus. Aunty became instantly a thing of dash and electricity, collected parcels, shook Albert, replied to his thrusts with repartee, and finally headed a stampede out of the door.

The Irishman and his daughter also rose, and got out. I watched them leave stoically. It would have been too much to expect that they should be going any farther.

"Where are we?" said Ukridge sleepily. "Yeovil? Not far now. I tell you what it is, old horse, I could do with a drink."

With that remark he closed his eyes again, and returned to his slumbers. And, as he did so, my eye, roving discontentedly over the carriage, was caught by something lying in the far corner. It was "The Manœuvres of Arthur". The girl had left it behind.

I suppose what follows shows the vanity that obsesses young authors. It did not even present itself to me as a tenable theory

that the book might have been left behind on purpose, as being of no further use to the owner. It only occurred to me that, if I did not act swiftly, the poor girl would suffer a loss beside which the loss of a purse or vanity-case were trivial.

Five seconds later I was on the platform.

"Excuse me," I said, "I think . . . ?"

"Oh, thank you so much," said the girl.

I made my way back to the carriage, and lit my pipe in a glow of emotion.

"They are blue," I said to my immortal soul. "A wonderful, deep, soft, heavenly blue, like the sea at noonday."

4

The Arrival

FROM Axminster to Combe Regis the line runs through country as attractive as any that can be found in the island, and the train, as if in appreciation of this fact, does not hurry over the journey. It was late afternoon by the time we reached our destination.

The arrangements for the carrying of luggage at Combe Regis border on the primitive. Boxes are left on the platform, and later, when he thinks of it, a carrier looks in and conveys them into the valley and up the hill on the opposite side to the address written on the labels. The owner walks. Combe Regis is not a place for the halt and maimed.

Ukridge led us in the direction of the farm, which lay across the valley, looking through woods to the sea. The place was visible from the station, from which, indeed, standing as it did on the top of a hill, the view was extensive.

Half-way up the slope on the other side of the valley we left the road and made our way across a spongy field, Ukridge explaining that this was a short cut. We climbed through a hedge, crossed a stream and another field, and after negotiating a difficult bank, topped with barbed wire, found ourselves in a garden.

Ukridge mopped his forehead, and restored his pince-nez to their original position from which the passage of the barbed wire had dislodged them.

"This is the place," he said. "We've come in by the back way. Saves time. Tired, Millie?"

"A little, dear. I should like some tea."

"Same here," I agreed.

"That'll be all right," said Ukridge. "A most competent man of the name of Beale and his wife are in charge at present. I wrote to them telling them that we were coming to-day. They will be

ready for us. That's the way to do things, Garny old horse. Quiet efficiency. Perfect organisation."

We were at the front door by this time. Ukridge rang the bell. The noise echoed through the house, but there were no answering footsteps. He rang again. There is no mistaking the note of a bell in an empty house. It was plain that the competent man and his wife were out.

"Now what?" I said.

Mrs. Ukridge looked at her husband with calm confidence.

"This," said Ukridge, leaning against the door and endeavouring to button his collar at the back, "reminds me of an afternoon in the Argentine. Two other cheery sportsmen and myself tried for three-quarters of an hour to get into an empty house where there looked as if there might be something to drink, and we'd just got the door open when the owner turned up from behind a tree with a shot-gun. It was a little difficult to explain. As a matter of fact, we never did what you might call really thresh the matter out thoroughly in all its aspects, and you'd be surprised what a devil of a time it takes to pick buck-shot out of a fellow. There was a dog, too."

He broke off, musing dreamily on the happy past, and at this moment history partially repeated itself. From the other side of the door came a dissatisfied whine, followed by a short bark.

"Hullo," said Ukridge, "Beale has a dog." He frowned, annoyed. "What right," he added in an aggrieved tone, "has a beastly mongrel, belonging to a man I employ, to keep me out of my own house? It's a little hard. Here am I, slaving day and night to support Beale, and when I try to get into my own house his infernal dog barks at me. Upon my Sam it's hard!" He brooded for a moment on the injustice of things. "Here, let me get to the keyhole. I'll reason with the brute."

He put his mouth to the keyhole and roared "Goo' dog!" through it. Instantly the door shook as some heavy object hurled itself against it. The barking rang through the house.

"Come round to the back," said Ukridge, giving up the idea of conciliation, "we'll get in through the kitchen window."

The kitchen window proved to be insecurely latched. Ukridge

threw it open and we climbed in. The dog, hearing the noise, raced back along the passage and flung himself at the door, scratching at the panels. Ukridge listened with growing indignation.

"Millie, you know how to light a fire. Garnet and I will be collecting cups and things. When that scoundrel Beale arrives I shall tear him limb from limb. Deserting us like this! The man must be a thorough fraud. He told me he was an old soldier. If that's the sort of discipline they used to keep in his regiment, thank God we've got a Navy! Damn, I've broken a plate. How's the fire getting on, Millie? I'll chop Beale into little bits. What's that you've got there, Garny old horse? Tea? Good. Where's the bread? There goes another plate. Where's Mrs. Beale, too? By Jove, that woman wants killing as much as her blackguard of a husband. Whoever heard of a cook deliberately leaving her post on the day when her master and mistress were expected back? The abandoned woman. Look here, I'll give that dog three minutes, and if it doesn't stop scratching that door by then, I'll take a rolling-pin and go out and have a heart-to-heart talk with it. It's a little hard. My own house, and the first thing I find when I arrive is somebody else's beastly dog scratching holes in the doors and ruining the expensive paint. Stop it, you brute!"

The dog's reply was to continue his operations with immense vigour.

Ukridge's eyes gleamed behind their glasses.

"Give me a good large jug, laddie," he said with ominous calm.

He took the largest of the jugs from the dresser and strode with it into the scullery, whence came a sound of running water. He returned carrying the jug with both hands, his mien that of a general who sees his way to a masterstroke of strategy.

"Garny, old horse," he said, "freeze on to the handle of the door, and, when I give the word, fling wide the gates. Then watch that animal get the surprise of a lifetime."

I attached myself to the handle as directed. Ukridge gave the word. We had a momentary vision of an excited dog of the mongrel class framed in the open doorway, all eyes and teeth;

then the passage was occupied by a spreading pool, and indignant barks from the distance told that the enemy was thinking the thing over in some safe retreat.

"Settled *his* hash," said Ukridge complacently. "Nothing like resource, Garny my boy. Some men would have gone on letting a good door be ruined."

"And spoiled the dog for a ha'porth of water," I said.

At this moment Mrs. Ukridge announced that the kettle was boiling. Over a cup of tea Ukridge became the man of business.

"I wonder when those fowls are going to arrive. They should have been here to-day. It's a little hard. Here am I, all eagerness and anxiety, waiting to start an up-to-date chicken farm, and no fowls! I can't run a chicken farm without fowls. If they don't come to-morrow, I shall get after those people with a hatchet. There must be no slackness. They must bustle about. After tea I'll show you the garden, and we'll choose a place for a fowl-run. To-morrow we must buckle to. Serious work will begin immediately after breakfast."

"Suppose," I said, "the fowls arrive before we're ready for them?"

"Why, then they must wait."

"But you can't keep fowls cooped up indefinitely in a crate."

"Oh, that'll be all right. There's a basement to this house. We'll let 'em run about there till we're ready for them. There's always a way of doing things if you look for it. Organisation, my boy. That's the watchword. Quiet efficiency."

"I hope you are going to let the hens hatch some of the eggs, dear," said Mrs. Ukridge. "I should love to have some little chickens."

"Of course. By all means. My idea," said Ukridge, "was this. These people will send us fifty fowls of sorts. That means—call it forty-five eggs a day. Let 'em . . . Well, I'm hanged! There's that dog again. Where's the jug?"

But this time an unforeseen interruption prevented the manœuvre being the success it had been before. I had turned the handle and was about to pull the door open, while Ukridge, looking like some modern and dilapidated version of the *Dis-*

cobolus, stood beside me with his jug poised, when a voice spoke from the window.

"Stand still!" said the voice, "or I'll corpse you!"

I dropped the handle. Ukridge dropped the jug. Mrs. Ukridge dropped her tea-cup. At the window, with a double-barrelled gun in his hands, stood a short, square, red-headed man. The muzzle of his gun, which rested on the sill, was pointing in a straight line at the third button of my waistcoat.

Ukridge emitted a roar like that of a hungry lion.

"Beale! You scoundrelly, unprincipled demon! What the devil are you doing with that gun? Why were you out? What have you been doing? Why did you shout like that? Look what you've made me do."

He pointed to the floor. The very old pair of tennis shoes which he wore were by this time generously soaked with the spilled water.

"Lor, Mr. Ukridge, sir, is that you?" said the red-headed man calmly. "I thought you was burglars."

A short bark from the other side of the kitchen door, followed by a renewal of the scratching, drew Mr. Beale's attention to his faithful hound.

"That's Bob," he said.

"I don't know what you call the brute," said Ukridge. "Come in and tie him up. And mind what you're doing with that gun. After you've finished with the dog, I should like a brief chat with you, laddie, if you can spare the time and have no other engagements."

Mr. Beale, having carefully deposited the gun against the wall and dropped a pair of very limp rabbits on the floor, proceeded to climb in through the window. This operation concluded, he stood to one side while the besieged garrison passed out by the same route.

"You will find me in the garden," said Ukridge coldly. "I've one or two little things to say to you."

Mr. Beale grinned affably. He seemed to be a man of equable temperament.

The cool air of the garden was grateful after the warmth of the kitchen. It was a pretty garden, or would have been if it had

not been so neglected. I seemed to see myself sitting in a deck-chair on the lawn, smoking and looking through the trees at the harbour below. It was a spot, I felt, in which it would be an easy and pleasant task to shape the plot of my novel. I was glad I had come. About now, outside my lodgings in town, a particularly foul barrel-organ would be settling down to work.

"Oh, there you are, Beale," said Ukridge, as the servitor appeared. "Now then, what have you to say?"

The hired man looked thoughtful for a moment, then said that it was a fine evening.

"Fine evening?" shouted Ukridge. "What on earth has that got to do with it? I want to know why you and Mrs. Beale were out when we arrived."

"The missus went to Axminster, Mr. Ukridge, sir."

"She had no right to go to Axminster. It isn't part of her duties to go gadding about to Axminster. I don't pay her enormous sums to go to Axminster. You knew I was coming this evening."

"No, sir."

"What!"

"No sir."

"Beale," said Ukridge with studied calm, the strong man repressing himself. "One of us two is a fool."

"Yes, sir."

"Let us sift this matter to the bottom. You got my letter?"

"No, sir."

"My letter saying that I should arrive to-day. You didn't get it?"

"No, sir."

"Now, look here, Beale, this is absurd. I am certain that that letter was posted. I remember placing it in my pocket for that purpose. It is not there now. See. These are all the contents of my—well, I'm hanged."

He stood looking at the envelope which he had produced from his breast-pocket. A soft smile played over Mr. Beale's wooden face. He coughed.

"Beale," said Ukridge, "you—er—there seems to have been a mistake."

"Yes, sir."

"You are not so much to blame as I thought."

"No, sir."

There was a silence.

"Anyhow," said Ukridge in inspired tones, "I'll go and slay that infernal dog. I'll teach him to tear my door to pieces. Where's your gun, Beale?"

But better counsels prevailed, and the proceedings closed with a cold but pleasant little dinner, at which the spared mongrel came out unexpectedly strong with ingenious and diverting tricks.

5

Buckling To

SUNSHINE, streaming into my bedroom through the open window, woke me next day as distant clocks were striking eight. It was a lovely morning, cool and fresh. The grass of the lawn, wet with dew, sparkled in the sun. A thrush, who knew all about early birds and their perquisites, was filling in the time before the arrival of the worm with a song or two, as he sat in the bushes. In the ivy a colony of sparrows were opening the day with brisk scuffling. On the gravel in front of the house lay the mongrel, Bob, blinking lazily.

The gleam of the sea through the trees turned my thoughts to bathing. I dressed quickly and went out. Bob rose to meet me, waving an absurdly long tail. The hatchet was definitely buried now. That little matter of the jug of water was forgotten.

A walk of five minutes down the hill brought me, accompanied by Bob, to the sleepy little town. I passed through the narrow street, and turned on to the beach, walking in the direction of the combination of pier and breakwater which loomed up through the faint mist.

The tide was high, and, leaving my clothes to the care of Bob, who treated them as a handy bed, I dived into twelve feet of clear, cold water. As I swam, I compared it with the morning tub of London, and felt that I had done well to come with Ukridge to this pleasant spot. Not that I could rely on unbroken calm during the whole of my visit. I knew nothing of chicken-farming, but I was certain that Ukridge knew less. There would be some strenuous moments before that farm became a profitable commercial speculation. At the thought of Ukridge toiling on a hot afternoon to manage an undisciplined mob of fowls, I laughed, and swallowed a generous mouthful of salt water; and, turning, swam back to Bob and my clothes.

On my return, I found Ukridge, in his shirt-sleeves and minus a collar, assailing a large ham. Mrs. Ukridge, looking younger and more childlike than ever in brown holland, smiled at me over the tea-pot.

"Hullo, old horse," bellowed Ukridge, "where have you been? Bathing? Hope it's made you feel fit for work, because we've got to buckle to this morning."

"The fowls have arrived, Mr. Garnet," said Mrs. Ukridge, opening her eyes till she looked like an astonished kitten. "*Such* a lot of them. They're making such a noise."

To support her statement there floated in through the window a cackling which for volume and variety beat anything I had ever heard. Judging from the noise, it seemed as if England had been drained of fowls and the entire tribe of them dumped into the yard of Ukridge's farm.

"There seems to have been no stint," I said.

"Quite a goodish few, aren't there?" said Ukridge complacently. "But that's what we want. No good starting on a small scale. The more you have, the bigger the profits."

"What sorts have you got mostly?" I asked, showing a professional interest.

"Oh, all sorts. My theory, laddie, is this. It doesn't matter a bit what kind we get, because they'll all lay; and if we sell settings of eggs, which we will, we'll merely say it's an unfortunate accident if they turn out mixed when hatched. Bless you, people don't mind what breed a fowl is, so long as it's got two legs and a beak. These dealer chaps were so infernally particular. 'Any Dorkings?' they said. 'All right,' I said, 'bring on your Dorkings.' 'Or perhaps you will require a few Minorcas?' 'Very well,' I said, 'unleash the Minorcas.' They were going on—they'd have gone on for hours—but I stopped 'em. 'Look here, my dear old college chum,' I said kindly but firmly to the manager johnny—decent old buck, with the manners of a marquess—'look here,' I said, 'life is short, and we're neither of us as young as we used to be. Don't let us waste the golden hours playing guessing games. I want fowls. You sell fowls. So give me some of all sorts. Mix 'em up, laddie,' I said, 'mix 'em up.' And he

has, by jove. You go into the yard and look at 'em. Beale has turned them out of their crates. There must be one of every breed ever invented."

"Where are you going to put them?"

"That spot we chose by the paddock. That's the place. Plenty of mud for them to scratch about in, and they can go into the field when they feel like it, and pick up worms, or whatever they feed on. We must rig them up some sort of a shanty, I suppose, this morning. We'll go and tell 'em to send up some wire-netting and stuff from the town."

"Then we shall want hen-coups. We shall have to make those."

"Of course. So we shall. Millie, didn't I tell you that old Garnet was the man to think of things. I forgot the coops. We can't buy some, I suppose? On tick, of course."

"Cheaper to make them. Suppose we get a lot of boxes. Sugar-boxes are as good as any. It won't take long to knock up a few coops."

Ukridge thumped the table with enthusiasm, upsetting his cup.

"Garny, old horse, you're a marvel. You think of everything. We'll buckle to right away, and get the whole place fixed up the same as mother makes it. What an infernal noise those birds are making. I suppose they don't feel at home in the yard. Wait till they see the A1 compact residential mansions we'er going to put up for them. Finished breakfast? Then let's go out. Come along, Millie."

The red-headed Beale, discovered leaning in an attitude of thought on the yard gate and observing the feathered mob below with much interest, was roused from his reflections and despatched to the town for the wire and sugar boxes. Ukridge, taking his place at the gate, gazed at the fowls with the affectionate air of a proprietor.

"Well, they have certainly taken you at your word," I said, "as far as variety is concerned."

The man with the manners of a marquess seemed to have been at great pains to send a really representative selection of fowls. There were blue ones, black ones, white, grey, yellow, brown,

big, little, Dorkings, Minorcas, Cochin Chinas, Bantams, Wyandottes. It was an imposing spectacle.

The Hired Man returned towards the end of the morning, preceded by a cart containing the necessary wire and boxes; and Ukridge, whose enthusiasm brooked no delay, started immediately the task of fashioning the coops, while I, assisted by Beale, draped the wire-netting about the chosen spot next to the paddock. There were little unpleasantnesses—once a roar of anguish told that Ukridge's hammer had found the wrong billet, and on another occasion my flannel trousers suffered on the wire—but the work proceeded steadily. By the middle of the afternoon, things were in a sufficiently advanced state to suggest to Ukridge the advisability of a halt for refreshments.

"That's the way to do it," he said, beaming through misty pince-nez over a long glass. "That is the stuff to administer to 'em! At this rate we shall have the place in corking condition before bedtime. Quiet efficiency—that's the wheeze! What do you think of those for coops, Beale?"

The Hired Man examined them woodenly.

"I've seen worse, sir."

He continued his examination.

"But not many," he added. Beale's passion for the truth had made him unpopular in three regiments.

"They aren't so bad," I said, "but I'm glad I'm not a fowl."

"So you ought to be," said Ukridge, "considering the way you've put up that wire. You'll have them strangling themselves."

In spite of earnest labour the housing arrangements of the fowls were still in an incomplete state at the end of the day. The details of the evening's work are preserved in a letter which I wrote that night to my friend Lickford.

". . . Have you ever played a game called Pigs in Clover? We have just finished a merry bout of it, with hens instead of marbles, which has lasted for an hour and a half. We are all dead tired, except the Hired Man, who seems to be made of india-rubber. He has just gone for a stroll on the beach. Wants some exercise, I suppose. Personally, I feel as if I should never move again. You have no conception of the difficulty of rounding up

fowls and getting them safely to bed. Having no proper place to put them, we were obliged to stow some of them in the cube sugar-boxes and the rest in the basement. It has only just occurred to me that they ought to have had perches to roost on. It didn't strike me before. I shan't mention it to Ukridge, or that indomitable man will start making some, and drag me into it, too. After all, a hen can rough it for one night, and if I did a stroke more work I should collapse.

"My idea was to do the thing on the slow but sure principle. That is to say, take each bird singly and carry it to bed. It would have taken some time, but there would have been no confusion. But you can imagine that that sort of thing would not appeal to Stanley Featherstonehaugh! He likes his manœuvres to be on a large, dashing, Napoleonic scale. He said, 'Open the yard gate and let the blighters come out into the open; then sail in and drive them in mass formation through the back door into the basement.' It was a great idea, but there was one fatal flaw in it. It didn't allow for the hens scattering. We opened the gate, and out they all came like an audience coming out of a theatre. Then we closed in on them to bring off the big drive. For about three seconds it looked as if we might do it. Then Bob, the Hired Man's dog, an animal who likes to be in whatever's going on, rushed out of the house into the middle of them, barking. There was a perfect stampede, and Heaven only knows where some of those fowls are now. There was one in particular, a large yellow bird, which, I should imagine, is nearing London by this time. The last I saw of it, it was navigating at the rate of knots in that direction, with Bob after it, barking his hardest. The fowl was showing a rare turn of speed and gaining rapidly. Presently Bob came back, panting, having evidently given the thing up. We, in the meantime, were chasing the rest of the birds all over the garden. The affair had now resolved itself into the course of action I had suggested originally, except that instead of collecting them quietly and at our leisure, we had to run miles for each one we captured. After a time we introduced some sort of system into it. Mrs. Ukridge stood at the door. We chased the hens and brought them in. Then, as we put each through into the base-

ment, she shut the door on it. We also arranged Ukridge's sugar-box coops in a row, and when we caught a fowl we put it in the coop and stuck a board in front of it. By these strenuous means we gathered in about two-thirds of the lot. The rest are all over England. A few may still be in Dorsetshire, but I should not like to bet on it.

"So you see things are being managed on the up-to-date chicken farm on good, sound Ukridge principles. It is only the beginning. I look with confidence for further interesting events. I believe if Ukridge kept white mice he would manage to get feverish excitement out of it. He is at present lying on the sofa, smoking one of his infernal brand of cigars, drinking whisky and soda, and complaining with some bitterness because the whisky isn't so good as some he once tasted in Belfast. From the basement I can hear faintly the murmur of innumerable fowls."

6

Mr. Garnet's Narrative—has to do with a Reunion

THE day was Thursday, the date July the twenty-second. We had been chicken-farmers for a whole week, and things were beginning to settle down to a certain extent. The coops were finished. They were not masterpieces, and I have seen chickens pause before them in deep thought, as who should say "Now what?" but they were coops within the meaning of the Act, and we induced hens to become tenants.

The hardest work had been the fixing of the wire-netting. This was the department of the Hired Man and myself, Ukridge holding himself proudly aloof. While Beale and I worked ourselves to a fever in the sun, the senior partner of the farm sat on a deck-chair in the shade, offering not unkindly criticism and advice and from time to time abusing his creditors, who were numerous. For we had hardly been in residence a day before he began to order in a vast supply of necessary and unnecessary things, all on credit. Some he got from the village, others from neighbouring towns. Axminster he laid heavily under contribution. He even went as far afield as Dorchester. He had a persuasive way with him, and the tradesmen seemed to treat him like a favourite son. The things began to pour in from all sides—groceries, whisky, a piano, a gramophone, pictures. Also cigars in great profusion. He was not one of those men who want but little here below.

As regards the financial side of these transactions, his method was simple and masterly. If a tradesman suggested that a small cheque on account would not be taken amiss, as one or two sordid fellows did, he became pathetic.

"Confound it, sir," he would say with tears in his voice, laying a hand on the man's shoulder in a wounded way, "it's a trifle hard, when a gentleman comes to settle in your neighbourhood, that you should dun him for money before he has got the

preliminary expenses about the house off his back." This sounded well, and suggested the disbursement of huge sums for rent. The fact that the house had been lent him rent free was kept with some care in the background. Having weakened the man with pathos, he would strike a sterner note. "A little more of this," he would go on, "and I'll close my account. Why, damme, in all my experience I've never heard anything like it!" Upon which the man would apologise, and go away, forgiven, with a large order for more goods.

By these statesmanlike methods he had certainly made the place very comfortable. I suppose we all realised that the things would have to be paid for some day, but the thought did not worry us.

"Pay?" bellowed Ukridge on the only occasion when I ventured to bring up the unpleasant topic, "of course we shall pay. Why not? I don't like to see this faint-hearted spirit in you, old horse. The money isn't coming in yet, I admit, but we must give it time. Soon we shall be turning over hundreds a week, hundreds! I'm in touch with all the big places—Whiteley's, Harrod's, all the nibs. Here I am, I said to them, with a large chicken farm with all the modern improvements. You want eggs, old horses, I said: I supply them. I will let you have so many hundred eggs a week, I said; what will you give for them? Well, I admit their terms did not come up to my expectations altogether, but we must not sneer at small prices at first.

"When we get a connection, we shall be able to name our terms. It stands to reason, laddie. Have you ever seen a man, woman, or child who wasn't eating an egg or just going to eat an egg or just coming away from eating an egg? I tell you, the good old egg is the foundation of daily life. Stop the first man you meet in the street and ask him which he'd sooner lose, his egg or his wife, and see what he says! We're on to a good thing, Garny, my boy. Pass the whisky!"

The upshot of it was that the firms mentioned supplied us with a quantity of goods, agreeing to receive phantom eggs in exchange. This satisfied Ukridge. He had a faith in the laying power of his hens which would have flattered them if they could have known

it. It might also have stimulated their efforts in that direction, which up to date were feeble.

It was now, as I have said, Thursday, the twenty-second of July—a glorious, sunny morning, of the kind which Providence sends occasionally, simply in order to allow the honest smoker to take his after-breakfast pipe under ideal conditions. These are the pipes to which a man looks back in after years with a feeling of wistful reverence, pipes smoked in perfect tranquillity, mind and body alike at rest. It is over pipes like these that we dream our dreams, and fashion our masterpieces.

My pipe was behaving like the ideal pipe; and, as I strolled spaciously about the lawn, my novel was growing nobly. I had neglected my literary work for the past week, owing to the insistent claims of the fowls. I am not one of those men whose minds work in placid independence of the conditions of life. But I was making up for lost time now. With each blue cloud that left my lips and hung in the still air above me, striking scenes and freshets of sparkling dialogue rushed through my brain. Another uninterrupted half hour, and I have no doubt that I should have completed the framework of a novel which would have placed me in that select band of authors who have no Christian names. Another half hour, and posterity would have known me as "Garnet".

But it was not to be.

"Stop her! Catch her, Garny, old horse!"

I had wandered into the paddock at the moment. I looked up. Coming towards me at her best pace was a small hen. I recognised her immediately. It was the disagreeable, sardonic-looking bird which Ukridge, on the strength of an alleged similarity of profile to his wife's nearest relative, had christened Aunt Elizabeth. A Bolshevist hen, always at the bottom of any disturbance in the fowl-run, a bird which ate its head off daily at our expense and bit the hands which fed it by resolutely declining to lay a single egg. Behind this fowl ran Bob, doing, as usual, the thing that he ought not to have done. Bob's wrong-headedness in the matter of our hens was a constant source of inconvenience. From the first, he had seemed to regard the laying-in of our stock purely

in the nature of a tribute to his sporting tastes. He had a fixed idea that he was a hunting dog and that, recognising this, we had very decently provided him with the material for the chase.

Behind Bob came Ukridge. But a glance was enough to tell me that he was a negligible factor in the pursuit. He was not built for speed. Already the pace had proved too much for him, and he had appointed me his deputy, with full powers to act.

"After her, Garny, old horse! Valuable bird! Mustn't be lost!"

When not in a catalepsy of literary composition, I am essentially the man of action. I laid aside my novel for future reference, and we passed out of the paddock in the following order. First, Aunt Elizabeth, as fresh as paint, going well. Next, Bob, panting and obviously doubtful of his powers of staying the distance. Lastly, myself, determined, but wishing I were five years younger.

After the first field Bob, like the dilettante and unstable dog he was, gave it up, and sauntered off to scratch at a rabbit-hole with an insufferable air of suggesting that that was what he had come out for all the time. I continued to pound along doggedly. I was grimly resolute. I had caught Aunt Elizabeth's eye as she passed me, and the contempt in it had cut me to the quick. This bird despised me. I am not a violent or a quick-tempered man, but I have my self-respect. I will not be sneered at by hens. All the abstract desire for Fame which had filled my mind five minutes before was concentrated now on the task of capturing this supercilious bird.

We had been travelling down hill all this time, but at this point we crossed a road and the ground began to rise. I was in that painful condition which occurs when one has lost one's first wind and has not yet got one's second. I was hotter than I had ever been in my life.

Whether Aunt Elizabeth, too, was beginning to feel the effects of her run, or whether she did it out of the pure effrontery of her warped and unpleasant nature, I do not know; but she now slowed down to walk, and even began to peck in a tentative manner at the grass. Her behaviour infuriated me. I felt that I was being treated as a cipher. I vowed that this bird should realise yet, even if, as seemed probable, I burst in the process, that it was

no light matter to be pursued by J. Garnet, author of "The Manœuvres of Arthur", etc., a man of whose work so capable a judge as the Peebles *Advertiser* had said "Shows promise."

A judicious increase of pace brought me within a yard or two of my quarry. But Aunt Elizabeth, apparently distrait, had the situation well in hand. She darted from me with an amused chuckle, and moved off rapidly again up the hill.

I followed, but there was that within me that told me I had shot my bolt. The sun blazed down, concentrating its rays on my back to the exclusion of the surrounding scenery. It seemed to follow me about like a limelight.

We had reached level ground. Aunt Elizabeth had again slowed to a walk, and I was capable of no better pace. Very gradually I closed in. There was a high boxwood hedge in front of us; and, just as I came close enough once more to stake my all on a single grab, Aunt Elizabeth, with another of her sardonic chuckles, dived in head-foremost and struggled through in the mysterious way in which birds do get through hedges. The sound of her faint spinster-like snigger came to me as I stood panting, and roused me like a bugle. The next moment I too had plunged into the hedge.

I was in the middle of it, very hot, tired, and dirty, when from the other side I heard a sudden shout of "Mark over! Bird to the right!" and the next moment I found myself emerging with a black face and tottering knees on the gravel path of a private garden. Beyond the path was a croquet lawn, and on this lawn I perceived, as through a glass darkly, three figures. The mist cleared from my eyes, and I recognised two of them.

One was the middle-aged Irishman who had travelled down with us in the train. The other was his blue-eyed daughter.

The third member of the party was a man, a stranger to me. By some miracle of adroitness he had captured Aunt Elizabeth, and was holding her in spite of her protests in a workmanlike manner behind the wings.

7

The Entente Cordiale is Sealed

THERE are moments and moments. The present one belonged to the more painful variety.

Even to my exhausted mind it was plain that there was a need here for explanations. An Irishman's croquet-lawn is his castle, and strangers cannot plunge in through hedges without inviting comment.

Unfortunately, speech was beyond me. I could have emptied a water-butt, lain down and gone to sleep, or melted ice with a touch of the finger, but I could not speak. The conversation was opened by the other man, in whose restraining hand Aunt Elizabeth now lay, outwardly resigned but inwardly, as I, who knew her haughty spirit, could guess, boiling with baffled resentment. I could see her looking out of the corner of her eye, trying to estimate the chances of getting in one good hard peck with her aquiline beak.

"Come right in," said the man pleasantly. "Don't knock."

I stood there, gasping. I was only too well aware that I presented a quaint appearance. I had removed my hat before entering the hedge, and my hair was full of twigs and other foreign substances. My face was moist and grimy. My mouth hung open. My legs felt as if they had ceased to belong to me.

"I must apol- . . ." I began, and ended the sentence with gulps.

The elderly gentleman looked at me with what seemed to be indignant surprise. His daughter appeared to my guilty conscience to be looking through me. Aunt Elizabeth sneered. The only friendly face was the man's. He regarded me with a kindly smile, as if I were some old friend who had dropped in unexpectedly.

"Take a long breath," he advised.

I took several, and felt better.

"I must apologise for this intrusion," I said successfully. "Unwarrantable" would have rounded off the sentence neatly,

but I would not risk it. It would have been mere bravado to attempt unnecessary words of five syllables. I took in more breath. "The fact is, I did—didn't know there was a private garden beyond the hedge. If you will give me my hen . . ."

I stopped. Aunt Elizabeth was looking away, as if endeavouring to create an impression of having nothing to do with me. I am told by one who knows that hens cannot raise their eyebrows, not having any; but I am prepared to swear that at this moment Aunt Elizabeth raised hers. I will go further. She sniffed.

"Here you are," said the man. "Though it's hard to say good-bye."

He held out the hen to me, and at this point a hitch occurred. He did his part, the letting go, all right. It was in my department, the taking hold, that the thing was bungled. Aunt Elizabeth slipped from my grasp like an eel, stood for a moment eyeing me satirically with her head on one side, then fled and entrenched herself in some bushes at the end of the lawn.

There are times when the most resolute man feels that he can battle no longer with fate; when everything seems against him and the only course is a dignified retreat. But there is one thing essential to a dignified retreat. You must know the way out. It was the lack of that knowledge that kept me standing there, looking more foolish than anyone has ever looked since the world began. I could not retire by way of the hedge. If I could have leaped the hedge with a single debonair bound, that would have been satisfactory. But the hedge was high, and I did not feel capable at the moment of achieving a debonair bound over a footstool.

The man saved the situation. He seemed to possess that magnetic power over his fellows which marks the born leader. Under his command we became an organised army. The common object, the pursuit of the elusive Aunt Elizabeth, made us friends. In the first minute of the proceedings the Irishman was addressing me as "me dear boy", and the man, who had introduced himself as Mr. Chase—a lieutenant, I learned later, in His Majesty's Navy—was shouting directions to me by name. I have never assisted at any ceremony at which formality was so completely

dispensed with. The ice was not merely broken; it was shivered into a million fragments.

"Go in and drive her out, Garnet," shouted Mr. Chase. "In my direction if you can. Look out on the left, Phyllis."

Even in that disturbing moment I could not help noticing his use of the Christian name. It seemed to me more than sinister. I did not like the idea of dashing young lieutenants in the senior service calling a girl Phyllis whose eyes had haunted me since I had first seen them.

Nevertheless, I crawled into the bushes and administered to Aunt Elizabeth a prod in the lower ribs—if hens have lower ribs. The more I study hens, the more things they seem able to get along without—which abruptly disturbed her calm detachment. She shot out at the spot where Mr. Chase was waiting with his coat off, and was promptly enveloped in that garment and captured.

"The essence of strategy," observed Mr. Chase approvingly, "is surprise. A neat piece of work!"

I thanked him. He deprecated my thanks. He had, he said, only done his duty, as expected to by England. He then introduced me to the elderly Irishman, who was, it seemed, a professor at Dublin University, by name, Derrick. Whatever it was that he professed, it was something that did not keep him for a great deal of his time at the University. He informed me that he always spent his summers at Combe Regis.

"I was surprised to see you at Combe Regis," I said. "When you got out at Yeovil, I thought I had seen the last of you."

I think I am gifted beyond other men as regards the unfortunate turning of sentences.

"I meant," I added, "I was afraid I had."

"Ah, of course," he said, "you were in our carriage coming down. I was confident I had seen you before. I never forget a face."

"It would be a kindness," said Mr. Chase, "if you would forget Garnet's as now exhibited. You seem to have collected a good deal of the scenery coming through that hedge."

"I was wondering——" I said. "A wash—if I might——"

"Of course, me boy, of course," said the professor. "Tom, take Mr. Garnet off to your room, and then we'll have lunch. You'll stay to lunch, Mr. Garnet?"

I thanked him, commented on possible inconvenience to his arrangements, was overruled, and went off with my friend the lieutenant to the house. We imprisoned Aunt Elizabeth in the stables, to her profound indignation, gave directions for lunch to be served to her, and made our way to Mr. Chase's room.

"So you've met the professor before?" he said, hospitably laying out a change of raiment for me—we were fortunately much of a height and build.

"I have never spoken to him," I said. "We travelled down from London in the same carriage."

"He's a dear old boy, if you rub him the right way. But—I'm telling you this for your good and guidance; a man wants a chart in a strange sea—he can cut up rough. And, when he does, he goes off like a four-point-seven and the population for miles round climbs trees. I think, if I were you, I shouldn't mention Sir Edward Carson at lunch."

I promised that I would try to avoid the temptation.

"In fact, you'd better keep off Ireland altogether. It's the safest plan. Any other subject you like. Chatty remarks on Bimetallism would meet with his earnest attention. A lecture on What to do with the Cold Mutton would be welcomed. But not Ireland. Shall we go down?"

We got to know each other at lunch.

"Do you hunt hens," asked Tom Chase, who was mixing the salad—he was one of those men who seemed to do everything a shade better than anyone else—"for amusement or by your doctor's orders? Many doctors, I believe, insist on it."

"Neither," I said, "and especially not for amusement. The fact is, I've been lured down here by a friend of mine who has started a chicken farm——"

I was interrupted. All three of them burst out laughing. Tom Chase allowed the vinegar to trickle on to the cloth, missing the salad-bowl by a clear two inches.

"You don't mean to tell us," he said, "that you really come

from the one and only chicken farm? Why, you're the man we've all been praying to meet for days past. You're the talk of the town. If you can call Combe Regis a town. Everybody is discussing you. Your methods are new and original, aren't they?"

"Probably. Ukridge knows nothing about fowls. I know less. He considers it an advantage. He says our minds ought to be unbiased."

"Ukridge!" said the professor. "That was the name old Dawlish, the grocer, said. I never forget a name. He is the gentleman who lectures on the management of poultry? You do not?"

I hastened to disclaim any such feat. I had never really approved of these infernal talks on the art of chicken-farming which Ukridge had dropped into the habit of delivering when anybody visited our farm. I admit that it was a pleasing spectacle to see my managing director in a pink shirt without a collar and very dirty flannel trousers lecturing the intelligent native; but I had a feeling that the thing tended to expose our ignorance to men who had probably had to do with fowls from their cradle up.

"His lectures are very popular," said Phyllis Derrick with a little splutter of mirth.

"He enjoys them," I said.

"Look here, Garnet," said Tom Chase. "I hope you won't consider all these questions impertinent, but you've no notion of the thrilling interest we all take—at a distance—in your farm. We have been talking of nothing else for a week. I have dreamed of it three nights running. Is Mr. Ukridge doing this as a commercial speculation, or is he an eccentric millionaire?"

"He's not a millionaire yet, but I believe he intends to be one shortly, with the assistance of the fowls. But you mustn't look on me as in any way responsible for the arrangements at the farm. I am merely a labourer. The brainwork of the business lies in Ukridge's department. As a matter of fact, I came down here principally in search of golf."

"Golf?" said Professor Derrick, with the benevolent approval of the enthusiast towards a brother. "I'm glad you play golf. We must have a round together."

"As soon as ever my professional duties will permit," I said gratefully.

There was croquet after lunch—a game at which I am a poor performer. Phyllis Derrick and I played the professor and Tom Chase. Chase was a little better than myself; the professor, by dint of extreme earnestness and care, managed to play a fair game; and Phyllis was an expert.

"I was reading a book," she said, as we stood together watching the professor shaping at his ball at the other end of the lawn, "by an author of the same surname as you, Mr. Garnet. Is he a relation of yours?"

"My name is Jeremy, Miss Derrick."

"Oh, you wrote it?" She turned a little pink. "Then you must have—oh, nothing."

"I couldn't help it, I'm afraid."

"Did you know what I was going to say?"

"I guessed. You were going to say that I must have heard your criticisms in the train. You were very lenient, I thought."

"I didn't like your heroine."

"No. What is a 'creature', Miss Derrick?"

"Pamela in your book is a 'creature'," she replied unsatisfactorily.

Shortly after this the game came somehow to an end. I do not understand the intricacies of croquet. But Phyllis did something brilliant and remarkable with the balls, and we adjourned for tea. The sun was setting as I left to return to the farm, with Aunt Elizabeth stored neatly in a basket in my hand. The air was deliciously cool, and full of that strange quiet which follows soothingly on the skirts of a broiling midsummer afternoon. Far away, seeming to come from another world, a sheep-bell tinkled, deepening the silence. Alone in a sky of the palest blue there gleamed a small, bright star.

I addressed this star.

"She was certainly very nice to me. Very nice indeed." The star said nothing.

"On the other hand, I take it that, having had a decent up-

bringing, she would have been equally polite to any other man whom she had happened to meet at her father's house. Moreover, I don't feel altogether easy in my mind about that naval chap. I fear the worst."

The star winked.

"He calls her Phyllis," I said.

"Charawk!" chuckled Aunt Elizabeth from her basket, in that beastly cynical, satirical way which has made her so disliked by all right-thinking people.

8

A Little Dinner at Ukridge's

"EDWIN comes to-day," said Mrs. Ukridge.

"And the Derricks," said Ukridge, sawing at the bread in his energetic way. "Don't forget the Derricks, Millie."

"No, dear. Mrs. Beale is going to give us a very nice dinner. We talked it over yesterday."

"Who is Edwin?" I asked.

We were finishing breakfast on the second morning after my visit to the Derricks. I had related my adventures to the staff of the farm on my return, laying stress on the merits of our neighbours and their interest in our doings, and the Hired Retainer had been sent off next morning with a note from Mrs. Ukridge inviting them to look over the farm and stay to dinner.

"Edwin?" said Ukridge. "Oh, beast of a cat."

"Oh, Stanley!" said Mrs. Ukridge plaintively. "He's not. He's such a dear, Mr. Garnet. A beautiful, pure-bred Persian. He has taken prizes."

"He's always taking something. That's why he didn't come down with us."

"A great, horrid, *beast* of a dog bit him, Mr. Garnet." Mrs. Ukridge's eyes became round and shone. "And poor Edwin had to go to a cats' hospital."

"And I hope," said Ukridge, "the experience will do him good. Sneaked a dog's dinner, Garnet, under his very nose, if you please. Naturally the dog lodged a protest."

"I'm so afraid that he will be frightened of Bob. He will be very timid, and Bob's so boisterous. Isn't he, Mr. Garnet?"

"That's all right," said Ukridge. "Bob won't hurt him, unless he tries to steal his dinner. In that case we will have Edwin made into a rug."

"Stanley doesn't like Edwin," said Mrs. Ukridge, sadly.

Edwin arrived early in the afternoon, and was shut into the kitchen. He struck me as a handsome cat, but nervous.

The Derricks followed two hours later. Mr Chase was not of the party.

"Tom had to go to London," explained the professor, "or he would have been delighted to come. It was a disappointment to the boy, for he wanted to see the farm."

"He must come some other time," said Ukridge. "We invite inspection. Look here," he broke off suddenly—we were nearing the fowl-run now, Mrs. Ukridge walking in front with Phyllis Derrick—"were you ever at Bristol?"

"Never, sir," said the professor.

"Because I knew just such another fat little buffer there a few years ago. Gay old bird, he was. He——"

"This is the fowl-run, professor," I broke in, with a moist, tingling feeling across my forehead and up my spine. I saw the professor stiffen as he walked, while his face deepened in colour. Ukridge's breezy way of expressing himself is apt to electrify the stranger.

"You will notice the able way—ha! ha!—in which the wire-netting is arranged," I continued feverishly. "Took some doing, that. By Jove, yes. It was hot work. Nice lot of fowls, aren't they? Rather a mixed lot, of course. Ha! ha! That's the dealer's fault though. We are getting quite a number of eggs now. Hens wouldn't lay at first. Couldn't make them."

I babbled on, till from the corner of my eye I saw the flush fade from the professor's face and his back gradually relax its poker-like attitude. The situation was saved for the moment, but there was no knowing what further excesses Ukridge might indulge in. I managed to draw him aside as we went through the fowl-run, and expostulated.

"For goodness' sake, be careful," I whispered. "You've no notion how touchy he is."

"But *I* said nothing," he replied, amazed.

"Hang it, you know, nobody likes to be called a fat little buffer to his face."

"What! My dear old man, nobody minds a little thing like that. We can't be stilted and formal. It's ever so much more friendly to relax and be chummy."

Here we rejoined the others, and I was left with a leaden foreboding of gruesome things in store. I knew what manner of man Ukridge was when he relaxed and became chummy. Friendships of years' standing had failed to survive the test.

For the time being, however, all went well. In his rôle of lecturer he offended no one, and Phyllis and her father behaved admirably. They received his strangest theories without a twitch of the mouth.

"Ah," the professor would say, "now is that really so? Very interesting indeed."

Only once, when Ukridge was describing some more than usually original device for the furthering of the interests of his fowls, did a slight spasm disturb Phyllis's look of attentive reverence.

"And you have really had no previous experience in chicken-farming?" she said.

"None," said Ukridge, beaming through his glasses. "Not an atom. But I can turn my hand to anything, you know. Things seem to come naturally to me somehow."

"I see," said Phyllis.

It was while matters were progressing with this beautiful smoothness that I observed the square form of the Hired Retainer approaching us. Somehow—I cannot say why—I had a feeling that he came with bad news. Perhaps it was his air of quiet satisfaction which struck me as ominous.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Ukridge, sir."

Ukridge was in the middle of a very eloquent excursus on the feeding of fowls, a subject on which he held views of his own as ingenious as they were novel. The interruption annoyed him.

"Well, Beale," he said, "what is it?"

"That there cat, sir, what came to-day."

"Oh, Beale," cried Mrs. Ukridge in agitation, "*what* has happened?"

"Having something to say to the missis—"

"What has happened? Oh, Beale, don't say that Edwin has been hurt? Where is he? Oh, *poor* Edwin!"

"Having something to say to the missis—"

"If Bob has bitten him I hope he had his nose *well* scratched," said Mrs. Ukridge vindictively.

"Having something to say to the missis," resumed the Hired Retainer tranquilly, "I went into the kitchen ten minutes back. The cat was sitting on the mat."

Beale's narrative style closely resembled that of a certain book I had read in my infancy. I wish I could remember its title. It was a well-written book.

"Yes, Beale, yes?" said Mrs. Ukridge. "Oh, do go on."

" 'Hullo, puss,' I says to him, 'and 'ow are *you*, sir?' 'Be careful,' says the missis. "E's that timid,' she says, 'you wouldn't believe,' she says. "E's only just settled down, as you may say,' she says. 'Ho, don't you fret,' I says to her, " 'im and me understands each other. 'Im and me,' I says, 'is old friends. 'E's my dear old pal, Corporal Banks.' She grinned at that, ma'am, Corporal Banks being a man we'd 'ad many a 'earty laugh at in the old days. 'E was, in a manner of speaking, a joke between us."

"Oh, do—go—on, Beale. What has happened to Edwin?"

The Hired Retainer proceeded in calm, even tones.

"We was talking there, ma'am, when Bob, what had followed me unknown, trotted in. When the cat ketched sight of 'im sniffing about, there was such a spitting and swearing as you never 'eard; and blowed," said Mr. Beale amusedly, "blowed if the old cat didn't give one jump, and move in quick time up the chimney, where 'e now remains, paying no 'eed to the missis' attempts to get him down again."

Sensation, as they say in the reports.

"But he'll be cooked," cried Phyllis, open-eyed.

"No, he won't. Nor will our dinner. Mrs. Beale always lets the kitchen fire out during the afternoon. And how she's going to light it with that—"

There was a pause while one might count three. It was plain that the speaker was struggling with himself.

"—that cat," he concluded safely, "up the chimney? It's a cold dinner we'll get to-night, if that cat doesn't come down."

The professor's face fell. I had remarked on the occasion when I had lunched with him his evident fondness for the pleasures of

the table. Cold impromptu dinners were plainly not to his taste.

We went to the kitchen in a body. Mrs. Beale was standing in front of the empty grate, making seductive cat-noises up the chimney.

"What's all this, Mrs. Beale?" said Ukridge.

"He won't come down, sir, not while he thinks Bob's about. And how I'm to cook dinner for five with him up the chimney I don't see, sir."

"Prod at him with a broom handle, Mrs. Beale," said Ukridge.

"Oh, don't hurt poor Edwin," said Mrs. Ukridge.

"I 'ave tried that, sir, but I can't reach him, and I'm only bin and drove 'im further up. What must be," added Mrs. Beale philosophically, "must be. He may come down of his own accord in the night. Bein' 'ungry."

"Then what we must do," said Ukridge in a jovial manner, which to me at least seemed out of place, "is to have a regular, jolly picnic-dinner, what? Whack up whatever we have in the larder, and eat that."

"A regular, jolly picnic-dinner," repeated the professor gloomily. I could read what was passing in his mind—remorse for having come at all, and a faint hope that it might not be too late to back out of it.

"That will be splendid," said Phyllis.

"Er, I think, my dear sir," said her father, "it would be hardly fair for us to give any further trouble to Mrs. Ukridge and yourself. If you will allow me, therefore, I will——"

Ukridge became gushingly hospitable. He refused to think of allowing his guests to go empty away. He would be able to whack up something, he said. There was quite a good deal of the ham left. He was sure. He appealed to me to endorse his view that there was a tin of sardines and part of a cold fowl and plenty of bread and cheese.

"And after all," he said, speaking for the whole company in the generous, comprehensive way enthusiasts have, "what more do we want in weather like this? A nice, light, cold, dinner is ever so much better for us than a lot of hot things."

We strolled out again into the garden, but somehow things seemed to drag. Conversation was fitful, except on the part of Ukridge, who continued to talk easily on all subjects, unconscious of the fact that the party was depressed and at least one of his guests rapidly becoming irritable. I watched the professor furtively as Ukridge talked on, and that ominous phrase of Mr. Chase's concerning four-point-seven guns kept coming into my mind. If Ukridge were to tread on any of his pet corns, as he might at any minute, there would be an explosion. The snatching of the dinner from his very mouth, as it were, and the substitution of a bread-and-cheese and sardines menu had brought him to the frame of mind when men turn and rend their nearest and dearest.

The sight of the table, when at length we filed into the dining-room, sent a chill through me. It was a meal for the very young or the very hungry. The uncompromising coldness and solidity of the viands was enough to appal a man conscious that his digestion needed humouring. A huge cheese faced us in almost a swash-buckling way. I do not know how else to describe it. It wore a blatant, rakish, *nemo-me-impune-lacessit* air, and I noticed that the professor shivered slightly as he saw it. Sardines, looking more oily and uninviting than anything I had ever seen, appeared in their native tin beyond the loaf of bread. There was a ham, in its third quarter, and a chicken which had suffered heavily during a previous visit to the table. Finally, a black bottle of whisky stood grimly beside Ukridge's plate. The professor looked the sort of man who drank claret of a special year, or nothing.

We got through the meal somehow, and did our best to delude ourselves into the idea that it was all great fun; but it was a shallow pretence. The professor was very silent by the time we had finished. Ukridge had been terrible. The professor had forced himself to be genial. He had tried to talk. He had told stories. And when he began one—his stories would have been the better for a little more briskness and condensation—Ukridge almost invariably interrupted him, before he had got half-way through, without a word of apology, and started on some anecdote of his own. He furthermore disagreed with nearly every opinion the professor expressed. It is true that he did it all in such a perfectly

friendly way, and was obviously so innocent of any intention of giving offence, that another man—or the same man at a better meal—might have overlooked the matter. But the professor, robbed of his good dinner, was at the stage when he had to attack somebody. Every moment I had been expecting the storm to burst.

It burst after dinner.

We were strolling in the garden, when some demon urged Ukridge, apropos of the professor's mention of Dublin, to start upon the Irish question. I had been expecting it momentarily, but my heart seemed to stand still when it actually arrived.

Ukridge probably knew less about the Irish question than any male adult in the kingdom, but he had boomed forth some very positive opinions of his own on the subject before I could get near enough to him to whisper a warning. When I did, I suppose I must have whispered louder than I had intended, for the professor heard me, and my words acted as the match to the powder.

"He's touchy about Ireland, is he?" he thundered. "Drop it, is it? And why? Why, sir? I'm one of the best tempered men that ever came from Dublin, let me tell you, and I will not stay here to be insulted by the insinuation that I cannot discuss Ireland as calmly as any one in this company or out of it. Touchy about Ireland, is it? Touchy——?"

"But, professor——"

"Take your hand off my arm, Mr. Garnet. I will not be treated like a child. I am as competent to discuss the affairs of Ireland without heat as any man, let me tell you."

"Father——"

"And let me tell you, Mr. Ukridge, that I consider your opinions poisonous. Poisonous, sir. And you know nothing whatever about the subject, sir. Every word you say betrays your profound ignorance. I don't wish to see you or to speak to you again. Understand that, sir. Our acquaintance began to-day, and it will cease to-day. Good-night to you, sir. Come, Phyllis, me dear. Mrs. Ukridge, good-night."

9

Dies Iræ

WHY is it, I wonder, that stories of Retribution calling at the wrong address strike us as funny instead of pathetic? I myself had been amused by them many a time. In a book which I had read only a few days before our cold-dinner party a shop-woman, annoyed with an omnibus conductor, had thrown a superannuated orange at him. It had found its billet not on him but on a perfectly inoffensive spectator. The missile, said the writer, " 'it a young copper full in the hyeball." I had enjoyed this when I read it, but now that Fate had arranged a precisely similar situation, with myself in the rôle of the young copper, the fun of the thing appealed to me not at all.

It was Ukridge who was to blame for the professor's regrettable explosion and departure, and he ought by all laws of justice to have suffered for it. As it was, I was the only person materially affected. It did not matter to Ukridge. He did not care twopence one way or the other. If the professor were friendly, he was willing to talk to him by the hour on any subject, pleasant or unpleasant. If, on the other hand, he wished to have nothing more to do with us, it did not worry him. He was content to let him go. Ukridge was a self-sufficing person.

But to me it was a serious matter. More than serious. If I have done my work as historian with an adequate degree of skill, the reader should have gathered by this time the state of my feelings.

> "I did not love as others do:
> None ever did that I've heard tell of.
> My passion was a by-word through
> The town she was, of course, the belle of."

At least it was—fortunately—not quite that; but it was certainly genuine and most disturbing, and it grew with the days. Some-

body with a taste for juggling with figures might write a very readable page or so of statistics in connection with the growth of love. In some cases it is, I believe, slow. In my own I can only say that Jack's beanstalk was a backward plant in comparison. It is true that we had not seen a great deal of one another, and that, when we had met, our interview had been brief and our conversation conventional; but it is the intervals between the meetings that do the real damage. Absence—I do not claim the thought as my own—makes the heart grow fonder. And now, thanks to Ukridge's amazing idiocy, a barrier had been thrust between us. Lord knows, the business of fishing for a girl's heart is sufficiently difficult and delicate without the addition of needless obstacles. To cut out the naval miscreant under equal conditions would have been a task ample enough for my modest needs. It was terrible to have to re-establish myself in the good graces of the professor before I could so much as begin to dream of Phyllis. Ukridge gave me no balm.

"Well, after all," he said, when I pointed out to him quietly but plainly my opinion of his tactlessness, "what does it matter? Old Derrick isn't the only person in the world. If he doesn't want to know us, laddie, we must jolly well pull ourselves together and stagger along without him. It's quite possible to be happy without knowing old Derrick. Millions of people are going about the world at this moment, singing like larks out of pure light-heartedness, who don't even know of his existence. And, as a matter of fact, old horse, we haven't time to waste making friends and being the social pets. Too much to do on the farm. Strict business is the watchword, my boy. We must be the keen tense men of affairs, or, before we know where we are, we shall find ourselves right in the gumbo.

"I've noticed, Garny, old horse, that you haven't been the whale for work lately that you might be. You must buckle to, laddie. There must be no slackness. We are at a critical stage. On our work now depends the success of the speculation. Look at those damned cocks. They're always fighting. Heave a stone at them, laddie, while you're up. What's the matter with you? You seem pipped. Can't get the novel off your chest, or what? You

take my tip and give your brain a rest. Nothing like manual labour for clearing the brain. All the doctors say so. Those coops ought to be painted to-day or to-morrow. Mind you, I think old Derrick would be all right if one persevered——"

"—and didn't call him a fat little buffer and contradict everything he said and spoil all his stories by breaking in with chestnuts of your own in the middle," I interrupted with bitterness.

"My dear old son, he didn't mind being called a fat little buffer. You keep harping on that. It's no discredit to a man to be a fat little buffer. Some of the noblest men I have met have been fat little buffers. What was the matter with old Derrick was a touch of liver. I said to myself, when I saw him eating cheese, 'that fellow's going to have a nasty shooting pain sooner or later.' I say, laddie, just heave another rock or two at those cocks, will you. They'll slay each other."

I had hoped, fearing the while that there was not much chance of such a thing happening, that the professor might get over his feeling of injury during the night and be as friendly as ever next day. But he was evidently a man who had no objection whatever to letting the sun go down upon his wrath, for when I met him on the following morning on the beach, he cut me in the most uncompromising manner.

Phyllis was with him at the time, and also another girl, who was, I supposed, from the strong likeness between them, her sister. She had the same mass of soft brown hair. But to me she appeared almost commonplace in comparison.

It is never pleasant to be cut dead, even when you have done something to deserve it. It is like treading on nothing where one imagined a stair to be. In the present instance the pang was mitigated to a certain extent—not largely—by the fact that Phyllis looked at me. She did not move her head, and I could not have declared positively that she moved her eyes; but nevertheless she certainly looked at me. It was something. She seemed to say that duty compelled her to follow her father's lead, and that the act must not be taken as evidence of any personal animus.

That, at least, was how I read off the message.

Two days later I met Mr. Chase in the village.

"Hullo, so you're back," I said.

"You've discovered my secret," he admitted; "will you have a cigar or a coconut?"

There was a pause.

"Trouble, I hear, while I was away," he said.

I nodded.

"The man I live with, Ukridge, did what you warned me against. Touched on the Irish question."

"Home Rule?"

"He mentioned it among other things."

"And the professor went off?"

"Like a bomb."

"He would. So now you have parted brass-rags. It's a pity."

I agreed. I am glad to say that I suppressed the desire to ask him to use his influence, if any, with Mr. Derrick to effect a reconciliation. I felt that I must play the game. To request one's rival to give one assistance in the struggle, to the end that he may be the more readily cut out, can hardly be considered cricket.

"I ought not to be speaking to you, you know," said Mr. Chase. "You're under arrest."

"He's still——?" I stopped for a word.

"Very much so. I'll do what I can."

"It's very good of you."

"But the time is not yet ripe. He may be said at present to be simmering down."

"I see. Thanks. Good-bye."

"So long."

And Mr. Chase walked on with long strides to the Cob.

The days passed slowly. I saw nothing more of Phyllis or her sister. The professor I met once or twice on the links. I had taken earnestly to golf in this time of stress. Golf is the game of disappointed lovers. On the other hand, it does not follow that because a man is a failure as a lover he will be any good at all on the links. My game was distinctly poor at first. But a round or two put me back into my proper form, which is fair.

The professor's demeanour at these accidental meetings on the links was a faithful reproduction of his attitude on the beach. Only by a studied imitation of the Absolute Stranger did he show that he had observed my presence.

Once or twice, after dinner, when Ukridge was smoking one of his special cigars while Mrs. Ukridge nursed Edwin (now moving in society once more, and in his right mind), I lit my pipe and walked out across the fields through the cool summer night till I came to the hedge that shut off the Derrick's grounds. Not the hedge through which I had made my first entrance, but another, lower, and nearer the house. Standing there under the shade of a tree I could see the lighted windows of the drawing-room. Generally there was music inside, and, the windows being opened on account of the warmth of the night, I was able to make myself a little more miserable by hearing Phyllis sing. It deepened the feeling of banishment.

I shall never forget those furtive visits. The intense stillness of the night, broken by an occasional rustling in the grass or the hedge; the smell of the flowers in the garden beyond; the distant drone of the sea.

> "God makes sech nights, all white and still,
> Fur'z you to look and listen."

Another day had generally begun before I moved from my hiding-place, and started for home, surprised to find my limbs stiff and my clothes bathed with dew.

10

I Enlist the Services of a Minion

IT would be interesting to know to what extent the work of authors is influenced by their private affairs. If life is flowing smoothly, are the novels they write in that period of content coloured with optimism? And if things are running crosswise, do they work off the resultant gloom on their faithful public? If, for instance, Mr. W. W. Jacobs had toothache, would he write like Hugh Walpole? If Maxim Gorky were invited to lunch by Trotsky, to meet Lenin, would he sit down and dash off a trifle in the vein of Stephen Leacock? Probably the eminent have the power of detaching their writing self from their living, work-a-day self; but, for my own part, the frame of mind in which I now found myself had a disastrous effect on my novel that was to be. I had designed it as a light comedy effort. Here and there a page or two to steady the reader and show him what I could do in the way of pathos if I cared to try; but in the main a thing of sunshine and laughter. But now great slabs of gloom began to work themselves into the scheme of it. A magnificent despondency became its keynote. It would not do. I felt that I must make a resolute effort to shake off my depression. More than ever the need of conciliating the professor was borne in upon me. Day and night I spurred my brain to think of some suitable means of engineering a reconciliation.

In the meantime I worked hard among the fowls, drove furiously on the links, and swam about the harbour when the affairs of the farm did not require my attention.

Things were not going well on our model chicken farm. Little accidents marred the harmony of life in the fowl-run. On one occasion a hen—not Aunt Elizabeth, I am sorry to say—fell into a pot of tar, and came out an unspeakable object. Ukridge put his spare pair of tennis shoes in the incubator to dry them and permanently spoiled the future of half-a-dozen eggs which

happened to have got there first. Chickens kept straying into the wrong coops, where they got badly pecked by the residents. Edwin slew a couple of Wyandottes, and was only saved from execution by the tears of Mrs. Ukridge.

In spite of these occurrences, however, his buoyant optimism never deserted Ukridge.

"After all," he said. "What's one bird more or less? Yes, I know I made a fuss when that beast of a cat lunched off those two, but that was simply the principle of the thing. I'm not going to pay large sums for chickens purely in order that a cat which I've never liked can lunch well. Still, we've plenty left, and the eggs are coming in better now, though we've still a deal of leeway to make up yet in that line. I got a letter from Whiteley's this morning asking when my first consignment was going to arrive. You know, these people make a mistake in hurrying a man. It annoys him. It irritates him. When we really get going, Garny, my boy, I shall drop Whiteley's. I shall cut them out of my list and send my eggs to their trade rivals. They shall have a sharp lesson. It's a little hard. Here am I, worked to death looking after things down here, and these men have the impertinence to bother me about their wretched business. Come in and have a drink, laddie, and let's talk it over."

It was on the morning after this that I heard him calling me in a voice in which I detected agitation. I was strolling about the paddock, as was my habit after breakfast, thinking about Phyllis and trying to get my novel into shape. I had just framed a more than usually murky scene for use in the earlier part of the book, when Ukridge shouted to me from the fowl-run.

"Garny, come here. I want you to see the most astounding thing."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Blest if I know. Look at those chickens. They've been doing that for the last half-hour."

I inspected the chickens. There was certainly something the matter with them. They were yawning—broadly, as if we bored them. They stood about singly and in groups, opening and shutting their beaks. It was an uncanny spectacle.

"What's the matter with them?"

"Can a chicken get a fit of the blues?" I asked. "Because if so, that's what they've got. I never saw a more bored-looking lot of birds."

"Oh, do look at that poor little brown one by the coop," said Mrs. Ukridge sympathetically; "I'm sure it's not well. See, it's lying down. What *can* be the matter with it?"

"I tell you what we'll do," said Ukridge. "We'll ask Beale. He once lived with an aunt who kept fowls. He'll know all about it. Beale!"

No answer.

"Beale!!"

A sturdy form in shirt-sleeves appeared through the bushes, carrying a boot. We seemed to have interrupted him in the act of cleaning it.

"Beale, you know all about fowls. What's the matter with these chickens?"

The Hired Retainer examined the blasé birds with a wooden expression on his face.

"Well?" said Ukridge.

"The 'ole thing 'ere," said the Hired Retainer, "is these 'ere fowls have been and got the roop."

I had never heard of the disease before, but it sounded bad.

"Is that what makes them yawn like that?" said Mrs. Ukridge.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Poor things!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And have they all got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What ought we to do?" asked Ukridge.

"Well, my aunt, sir, when 'er fowls 'ad the roop, she gave them snuff."

"Give them snuff, she did," he repeated, with relish, "every morning."

"Snuff!" said Mrs. Ukridge.

"Yes, ma'am. She give 'em snuff till their eyes bubbled."

Mrs. Ukridge uttered a faint squeak at this vivid piece of word-painting.

"And did it cure them?" asked Ukridge.

"No, sir," responded the expert soothingly.

"Oh, go away, Beale, and clean your beastly boots," said Ukridge. "You're no use. Wait a minute. Who would know about this infernal roop thing? One of those farmer chaps would, I suppose. Beale, go off to the nearest farmer, and give him my compliments, and ask him what he does when his fowls get the roop."

"Yes, sir."

"No, I'll go, Ukridge," I said. "I want some exercise."

I whistled to Bob, who was investigating a mole-heap in the paddock, and set off in the direction of the village of Up Lyme to consult Farmer Leigh on the matter. He had sold us some fowls shortly after our arrival, so might be expected to feel a kindly interest in their ailing families.

The path to Up Lyme lies across deep-grassed meadows. At intervals it passes over a stream by means of a footbridge. The stream curls through the meadows like a snake.

And at the first of these bridges I met Phyllis.

I came upon her quite suddenly. The other end of the bridge was hidden from my view. I could hear somebody coming through the grass, but not till I was on the bridge did I see who it was. We reached the bridge simultaneously. She was alone. She carried a sketching-block. All nice girls sketch a little.

There was room for one alone on the footbridge, and I drew back to let her pass.

It being the privilege of woman to make the first sign of recognition, I said nothing. I merely lifted my hat in a non-committing fashion.

"Are you going to cut me, I wonder?" I said to myself. She answered the unspoken question as I hoped it would be answered.

"Mr. Garnet," she said, stopping at the end of the bridge. A pause.

"I couldn't tell you so before, but I am so sorry this has happened."

"Oh, thanks awfully," I said, realising as I said it the miserable inadequacy of the English language. At a crisis when I would have given a month's income to have said something neat, epigrammatic, suggestive, yet withal courteous and respectful, I could only find a hackneyed, unenthusiastic phrase which I should have used in accepting an invitation from a bore to lunch with him at his club.

"Of course you understand my friends—must be my father's friends."

"Yes," I said gloomily. "I suppose so."

"So you must not think me rude if I—I——"

"Cut me," said I, with masculine coarseness.

"Don't seem to see you," said she, with feminine delicacy, "when I am with my father. You will understand?"

"I shall understand."

"You see,"—she smiled—"you are under arrest, as Tom says."

Tom!

"I see," I said.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

I watched her out of sight, and went on to interview Mr. Leigh.

We had a long and intensely uninteresting conversation about the maladies to which chickens are subject. He was verbose and reminiscent. He took me over his farm, pointing out as we went Dorkings with pasts, and Cochin Chinas which he had cured of diseases generally fatal on, as far as I could gather, Christian Science principles.

I left at last with instructions to paint the throats of the stricken birds with turpentine—a task imagination boggled at, and one which I proposed to leave exclusively to Ukridge and the Hired Retainer—and also a slight headache. A visit to the Cob would, I thought, do me good. I had missed my bathe that morning, and was in need of a breath of sea-air.

It was high tide, and there was deep water on three sides of the Cob.

In a small boat in the offing Professor Derrick appeared,

fishing. I had seen him engaged in this pursuit once or twice before. His only companion was a gigantic boatman, by name Harry Hawk, possibly a descendant of the gentleman of that name who went to Widdicombe Fair with Bill Brewer and old Uncle Tom Cobley and all on a certain memorable occasion, and assisted at the fatal accident to Tom Pearse's grey mare.

I sat on the seat at the end of the Cob and watched the professor. It was an instructive sight, an object-lesson to those who hold that optimism has died out of the race. I had never seen him catch a fish. He never looked to me as if he were at all likely to catch a fish. Yet he persevered.

There are few things more restful than to watch some one else busy under a warm sun. As I sat there, my pipe drawing nicely as the result of certain explorations conducted that morning with a straw, my mind ranged idly over large subjects and small. I thought of love and chicken-farming. I mused on the immortality of the soul and the deplorable speed at which two ounces of tobacco disappeared. In the end I always returned to the professor. Sitting, as I did, with my back to the beach, I could see nothing but his boat. It had the ocean to itself.

I began to ponder over the professor. I wondered dreamily if he were very hot. I tried to picture his boyhood. I speculated on his future, and the pleasure he extracted from life.

It was only when I heard him call out to Hawk to be careful, when a movement on the part of that oarsman set the boat rocking, that I began to weave romances round him in which I myself figured.

But, once started, I progressed rapidly. I imagined a sudden upset. Professor struggling in water. Myself (heroically): "Courage! I'm coming!" A few rapid strokes. Saved! Sequel, a subdued professor, dripping salt water and tears of gratitude, urging me to become his son-in-law. That sort of thing happened in fiction. It was a shame that it should not happen in real life. In my hot youth I once had seven stories in seven weekly penny papers in the same month, all dealing with a situation of the kind. Only the details differed. In "Not really a Coward" Vincent Devereux had rescued the earl's daughter from a fire, whereas

in "Hilda's Hero" it was the peppery old father whom Tom Slingsby saved. Singularly enough, from drowning. In other words, I, a very mediocre scribbler, had effected seven times in a single month what the Powers of the Universe could not manage once, even on the smallest scale.

It was precisely three minutes to twelve—I had just consulted my watch—that the great idea surged into my brain. At four minutes to twelve I had been grumbling impotently at Providence. By two minutes to twelve I had determined upon a manly and independent course of action.

Briefly it was this. Providence had failed to give satisfaction. I would, therefore, cease my connection with it, and start a rival business on my own account. After all, if you want a thing done well, you must do it yourself.

In other words, since a dramatic accident and rescue would not happen of its own accord, I would arrange one for myself. Hawk looked to me the sort of man who would do anything in a friendly way for a few shillings.

I had now to fight it out with Conscience. I quote the brief report which subsequently appeared in the *Recording Angel*:

Three-Round Contest: CONSCIENCE (Celestial B.C.) *v.* J. GARNET (unattached).

Round One.—Conscience came to the scratch smiling and confident. Led off lightly with a statement that it would be bad for a man of the professor's age to get wet. Garnet countered heavily, alluding to the warmth of the weather and the fact that the professor habitually enjoyed a bathe every day. Much sparring, Conscience not quite so confident, and apparently afraid to come to close quarters with his man. Time called, with little damage done.

Round Two.—Conscience, much freshened by the half minute's rest, feinted with the charge of deceitfulness, and nearly got home heavily with "What would Phyllis say if she knew?" Garnet, however, side-stepped cleverly with "But she won't know," and followed up the advantage with a damaging,

"Besides, it's all for the best." The round ended with a brisk rally on general principles, Garnet crowding in a lot of work. Conscience down twice, and only saved by the call of time.

Round Three (*and last*).—Conscience came up very weak, and with Garnet as strong as ever it was plain that the round would be a brief one. This proved to be the case. Early in the second minute Garnet cross-countered with "All's Fair in Love and War." Conscience down and out. The winner left the ring without a mark.

I rose, feeling much refreshed.

That afternoon I interviewed Mr. Hawk in the bar-parlour of the Net and Mackerel.

"Hawk," I said to him darkly, over a mystic and conspirator-like pot of ale, "I want you, next time you take Professor Derrick out fishing"—here I glanced round, to make sure that we were not overheard—"to upset him."

His astonished face rose slowly from the pot of ale like a full moon.

"What 'ud I do that for?" he gasped.

"Five shillings, I hope," said I, "but I am prepared to go to ten."

He gurgled.

I encored his pot of ale.

He kept on gurgling.

I argued with the man.

I spoke splendidly. I was eloquent, but at the same time concise. My choice of words was superb. I crystallised my ideas into pithy sentences which a child could have understood.

And at the end of half an hour he had grasped the salient points of the scheme. Also he imagined that I wished the professor upset by way of a practical joke. He gave me to understand that this was the type of humour which was to be expected from a gentleman from London. I am afraid he must at one period of his career have lived at one of those watering-places at which trippers congregate. He did not seem to think highly of the Londoner.

I let it rest at that. I could not give my true reason, and this served as well as any.

At the last moment he recollected that he, too, would get wet when the accident took place, and he raised the price to a sovereign.

A mercenary man. It is painful to see how rapidly the old simple spirit is dying out of our rural districts. Twenty years ago a fisherman would have been charmed to do a little job like that for a screw of tobacco.

11

The Brave Preserver

I COULD have wished, during the next few days, that Mr. Harry Hawk's attitude towards myself had not been so unctuously confidential and mysterious. It was unnecessary, in my opinion, for him to grin meaningly when he met me in the street. His sly wink when we passed each other on the Cob struck me as in indifferent taste. The thing had been definitely arranged (ten shillings down and ten when it was over), and there was no need for any cloak and dark-lantern effects. I objected strongly to being treated as the villain of a melodrama. I was merely an ordinary well-meaning man, forced by circumstances into doing the work of Providence. Mr Hawk's demeanour seemed to say, "We are two reckless scoundrels, but bless you, *I* won't give away your guilty secret." The climax came one morning as I was going along the street towards the beach. I was passing a dark doorway, when out shimmered Mr. Hawk as if he had been a spectre instead of the most substantial man within a radius of ten miles.

" 'St!" he whispered.

"Now look here, Hawk," I said wrathfully, for the start he had given me had made me bite my tongue, "this has got to stop. I refuse to be haunted in this way. What is it now?"

"Mr. Derrick goes out this morning, zur."

"Thank goodness for that," I said. "Get it over this morning, then, without fail. I couldn't stand another day of it."

I went on to the Cob, where I sat down. I was excited. Deeds of great import must shortly be done. I felt a little nervous. It would never do to bungle the thing. Suppose by some accident I were to drown the professor! Or suppose that, after all, he contented himself with a mere formal expression of thanks, and refused to let bygones be bygones. These things did not bear thinking of.

I got up and began to pace restlessly to and fro.

Presently from the farther end of the harbour there put off Mr. Hawk's boat, bearing its precious cargo. My mouth became dry with excitement.

Very slowly Mr. Hawk pulled round the end of the Cob, coming to a standstill some dozen yards from where I was performing my beat. It was evidently here that the scene of the gallant rescue had been fixed.

My eyes were glued upon Mr. Hawk's broad back. Only when going in to bat at cricket have I experienced a similar feeling of suspense. The boat lay almost motionless on the water. I had never seen the sea smoother. Little ripples plashed against the side of the Cob.

It seemed as if this perfect calm might continue for ever. Mr. Hawk made no movement. Then suddenly the whole scene changed to one of vast activity. I heard Mr. Hawk utter a hoarse cry, and saw him plunge violently in his seat. The professor turned half round, and I caught sight of his indignant face, pink with emotion. Then the scene changed again with the rapidity of a dissolving view. I saw Mr. Hawk give another plunge, and the next moment the boat was upside down in the water, and I was shooting headforemost to the bottom, oppressed with the indescribably clammy sensation which comes when one's clothes are thoroughly wet.

I rose to the surface close to the upturned boat. The first sight I saw was the spluttering face of Mr. Hawk. I ignored him, and swam to where the professor's head bobbed on the waters.

"Keep cool," I said. A silly remark in the circumstances.

He was swimming energetically but unskilfully. He appeared to be one of those men who can look after themselves in the water only when they are in bathing costume. In his shore clothes it would have taken him a week to struggle to land, if he had got there at all, which was unlikely.

I know all about saving people from drowning. We used to practise it with a dummy in the swimming-bath at school. I attacked him from the rear, and got a good grip of him by the shoulders. I then swam on my back in the direction of land, and beached him with much *éclat* at the feet of an admiring crowd.

I had thought of putting him under once or twice just to show him he was being rescued, but decided against such a course as needlessly realistic. As it was, I fancy he had swallowed of sea-water two or three hearty draughts.

The crowd was enthusiastic.

"Brave young feller," said somebody.

I blushed. This was Fame.

"Jumped in, he did, sure enough, an' saved the gentleman!"

"Be the old soul drownded?"

"That girt fule, 'Arry 'Awk!"

I was sorry for Mr. Hawk. Popular opinion was against him. What the professor said of him, when he recovered his breath, I cannot repeat—not because I do not remember it, but because there is a line, and one must draw it. Let it be sufficient to say that on the subject of Mr. Hawk he saw eye to eye with the citizen who had described him as a "girt fule". I could not help thinking that my fellow conspirator did well to keep out of it all. He was now sitting in the boat, which he had restored to its normal position, baling pensively with an old tin can. To satire from the shore he paid no attention.

The professor stood up, and stretched out his hand. I grasped it.

"Mr. Garnet," he said, for all the world as if he had been the father of the heroine of "Hilda's Hero", "we parted recently in anger. Let me thank you for your gallant conduct, and hope that bygones will be bygones."

I came out strong. I continued to hold his hand. The crowd raised a sympathetic cheer.

I said, "Professor, the fault was mine. Show that you have forgiven me by coming up to the farm and putting on something dry."

"An excellent idea, me boy; I *am* a little wet."

"A little," I agreed.

We walked briskly up the hill to the farm.

Ukridge met us at the gate.

He diagnosed the situation rapidly.

"You're all wet," he said. I admitted it.

"Professor Derrick has had an unfortunate boating accident," I explained.

"And Mr. Garnet heroically dived in, in all his clothes, and saved me life," broke in the professor. "A hero, sir. A—*choo*!"

"You're catching cold, old horse," said Ukridge, all friendliness and concern, his little differences with the professor having vanished like thawed snow. "This'll never do. Come upstairs and get into something of Garnet's. My own toggery wouldn't fit. What? Come along, come along, I'll get you some hot water. Mrs. Beale—Mrs. *Beale*! We want a large can of hot water. At once. What? Yes, immediately. What? Very well then, as soon as you can. Now then, Garny, my boy, out with the duds. What do you think of this, now, professor? A sweetly pretty thing in grey flannel. Here's a shirt. Get out of that wet toggery, and Mrs. Beale shall dry it. Don't attempt to tell me about it till you're changed. Socks! Socks forward. Show socks. Here you are. Coat? Try this blazer. That's right—that's right."

He bustled about till the professor was clothed, then marched him downstairs, and gave him a cigar.

"Now, what's all this? What happened?"

The professor explained. He was severe in his narration upon the unlucky Mr. Hawk.

"I was fishing, Mr. Ukridge, with me back turned, when I felt the boat rock violently from one side to the other to such an extent that I nearly lost me equilibrium, and then the boat upset. The man's a fool, sir. I could not see what had happened, my back being turned, as I say."

"Garnet must have seen. What happened, old horse?"

"It was very sudden," I said. "It seemed to me as if the man had got an attack of cramp. That would account for it. He has the reputation of being a most sober and trustworthy fellow."

"Never trust that sort of man," said Ukridge. "They are always the worst. It's plain to me that this man was beastly drunk, and upset the boat while trying to do a dance."

"A great curse, drink," said the professor.

"Why, yes, Mr. Ukridge, I think I will. Thank you. Thank you. That will be enough. Not all the soda, if you please. Ah! this

tastes pleasanter than salt water, Mr. Garnet. Eh? Eh? Ha—Ha!"

He was in the best of tempers, and I worked strenuously to keep him so. My scheme had been so successful that its iniquity did not worry me. I have noticed that this is usually the case in matters of this kind. It is the bungled crime that brings remorse.

"We must go round the links together one of these days, Mr. Garnet," said the professor. "I have noticed you there on several occasions, playing a strong game. I have lately taken to using a wooden putter. It is wonderful what a difference it makes."

Golf is a great bond of union. We wandered about the grounds discussing the game, the *entente cordiale* growing more firmly established every moment.

"We must certainly arrange a meeting," concluded the professor. "I shall be interested to see how we stand with regard to one another. I have improved my game considerably since I have been down here. Considerably."

"My only feat worthy of mention since I started the game," I said, "has been to halve a round with Angus M'Lurkin at St. Andrews."

"*The* M'Lurkin?" asked the Professor, impressed.

"Yes. But it was one of his very off days, I fancy. He must have had gout or something. And I have certainly never played so well since."

"Still——" said the professor. "Yes, we must really arrange to meet."

With Ukridge, who was in one of his less tactless moods, he became very friendly.

Ukridge's ready agreement with his strictures on the erring Hawk had a great deal to do with this. When a man has a grievance, he feels drawn to those who will hear him patiently and sympathise. Ukridge was all sympathy.

"The man is an unprincipled scoundrel," he said, "and should be torn limb from limb. Take my advice, and don't go out with him again. Show him that you are not a man to be trifled with. The spilt child dreads the water, what? Human life isn't safe with such men as Hawk roaming about."

"You are perfectly right, sir. The man can have no defence. I shall not employ him again."

I felt more than a little guilty while listening to this duet on the subject of the man whom I had lured from the straight and narrow path. But the professor would listen to no defence. My attempts at excusing him were ill received. Indeed, the professor showed such signs of becoming heated that I abandoned my fellow-conspirator to his fate with extreme promptness. After all, an addition to the stipulated reward—one of these days—would compensate him for any loss which he might sustain from the withdrawal of the professor's custom. Mr. Harry Hawk was in good enough case. I would see that he did not suffer.

Filled with these philanthropic feelings, I turned once more to talk with the professor of niblicks and approach shots and holes done in three without a brassy. We were a merry party at lunch—a lunch fortunately in Mrs. Beale's best vein, consisting of a roast chicken and sweets. Chicken had figured somewhat frequently of late on our daily bill of fare.

We saw the professor off the premises in his dried clothes, and I turned back to put the fowls to bed in a happier frame of mind than I had known for a long time. I whistled rag-time airs as I worked.

"Rum old buffer," said Ukridge meditatively, pouring himself out another whisky and soda. "My goodness, I should have liked to have seen him in the water. Why do I miss these good things?"

12

Some Emotions and Yellow Lupin

THE fame which came to me through that gallant rescue was a little embarrassing. I was a marked man. Did I walk through the village, heads emerged from windows, and eyes followed me out of sight. Did I sit on the beach, groups formed behind me and watched in silent admiration. I was the man of the moment.

"If we'd wanted an advertisement for the farm," said Ukridge on one of these occasions, "we couldn't have had a better one than you, Garny, my boy. You have brought us three distinct orders for eggs during the last week. And I'll tell you what it is, we need all the orders we can get that'll bring us in ready money. The farm is in a critical condition. The coffers are low, deuced low. And I'll tell you another thing. I'm getting precious tired of living on nothing but chicken and eggs. So's Millie, though she doesn't say so."

"So am I," I said, "and I don't feel like imitating your wife's proud reserve. I never want to see a chicken again. As for eggs, they are far too much for us."

For the last week monotony had been the keynote of our commissariat. We had had cold chicken and eggs for breakfast, boiled chicken and eggs for lunch, and roast chicken and eggs for dinner. Meals became a nuisance, and Mrs. Beale complained bitterly that we did not give her a chance. She was a cook who would have graced an alderman's house and served up noble dinners for gourmets, and here she was in this remote corner of the world ringing the changes on boiled chicken and roast chicken and boiled eggs and poached eggs. Mr. Whistler, set to paint sign-boards for public-houses, might have felt the same restless discontent. As for her husband, the Hired Retainer, he took life as tranquilly as ever, and seemed to regard the whole thing as the most exhilarating farce he had ever been in. I think he looked on Ukridge as an amiable lunatic, and was content to rough it a

little in order to enjoy the privilege of observing his movements. He made no complaints of the food. When a man has supported life for a number of years on incessant Army beef, the monotony of daily chicken and eggs scarcely strikes him.

"The fact is," said Ukridge, "these tradesmen round here seem to be a sordid, suspicious lot. They clamour for money."

He mentioned a few examples. Vickers, the butcher, had been the first to strike, with the remark that he would like to see the colour of Mr. Ukridge's money before supplying further joints. Dawlish, the grocer, had expressed almost exactly similar sentiments two days later; and the ranks of these passive resisters had been receiving fresh recruits ever since. To a man the tradesmen of Combe Regis seemed as deficient in Simple Faith as they were in Norman Blood.

"Can't you pay some of them a little on account?" I suggested. "It would set them going again."

"My dear old man," said Ukridge impressively, "we need every penny of ready money we can raise for the farm. The place simply eats money. That infernal roop let us in for I don't know what."

That insidious epidemic had indeed proved costly. We had painted the throats of the chickens with the best turpentine—at least Ukridge and Beale had—but in spite of their efforts, dozens had died, and we had been obliged to sink much more money than was pleasant in restocking the run. The battle which took place on the first day after the election of the new members was a sight to remember. The results of it were still noticeable in the depressed aspect of certain of the recently enrolled.

"No," said Ukridge, summing up, "these men must wait. We can't help their troubles. Why, good gracious, it isn't as if they'd been waiting for the money long. We've not been down here much over a month. I never heard of such a scandalous thing. 'Pon my word, I've a good mind to go round, and have a straight talk with one or two of them. I come and settle down here, and stimulate trade, and give them large orders, and they worry me with bills when they know I'm up to my eyes in work, looking after the fowls. One can't attend to everything. The

business is just now at its most crucial point. It would be fatal to pay any attention to anything else with things as they are. These scoundrels will get paid all in good time."

It is a peculiarity of situations of this kind that the ideas of debtor and creditor as to what constitutes a good time never coincide.

I am afraid that, despite the urgent need for strict attention to business, I was inclined to neglect my duties about this time. I had got into the habit of wandering off, either to the links, where I generally found the professor, sometimes Phyllis, or on long walks by myself. There was one particular walk along the cliffs, through some of the most beautiful scenery I have ever set eyes on, which more than any other suited my mood. I would work my way through the woods till I came to a small clearing on the very edge of the cliff. There I would sit and smoke by the hour. If ever I am stricken with smoker's heart, or staggers, or tobacco amblyopia, or any other of the cheery things which doctors predict for the devotee of the weed, I shall feel that I sowed the seeds of it that summer in that little clearing overlooking the sea. A man in love needs much tobacco. A man thinking out a novel needs much tobacco. I was in the grip of both maladies. Somehow I found that my ideas flowed more readily in that spot than in any other.

I had not been inside the professor's grounds since the occasion when I had gone in through the box-wood hedge. But on the afternoon following my financial conversation with Ukridge I made my way thither, after a toilet which, from its length, should have produced better results than it did. Not for four whole days had I caught so much as a glimpse of Phyllis. I had been to the links three times, and had met the professor twice, but on both occasions she had been absent. I had not had the courage to ask after her. I had an absurd idea that my voice or my manner would betray me in some way. I felt that I should have put the question with such an exaggerated show of indifference that all would have been discovered.

The professor was not at home. Nor was Mr. Chase. Nor was

Miss Norah Derrick, the lady I had met on the beach with the professor. Miss Phyllis, said the maid, was in the garden.

I went into the garden. She was sitting under the cedar by the tennis-lawn, reading. She looked up as I approached.

I said it was a lovely afternoon. After which there was a lull in the conversation. I was filled with a horrid fear that I was boring her. I had probably arrived at the very moment when she was most interested in her book. She must, I thought, even now be regarding me as a nuisance, and was probably rehearsing bitter things to say to the maid for not having had the sense to explain that she was out.

"I—er—called in the hope of seeing Professor Derrick," I said.

"You would find him on the links," she replied. It seemed to me that she spoke wistfully.

"Oh, it—it doesn't matter," I said. "It wasn't anything important."

This was true. If the professor had appeared then and there, I should have found it difficult to think of anything to say to him which would have accounted to any extent for my anxiety to see him.

"How are the chickens, Mr. Garnet?" said she.

The situation was saved. Conversationally, I am like a clockwork toy. I have to be set going. On the affairs of the farm I could speak fluently. I sketched for her the progress we had made since her visit. I was humorous concerning roop, epigrammatic on the subject of the Hired Retainer and Edwin.

"Then the cat did come down from the chimney?" said Phyllis.

We both laughed, and—I can answer for myself—I felt the better for it.

"He came down next day," I said, "and made an excellent lunch off one of our best fowls. He also killed another, and only just escaped death himself at the hands of Ukridge."

"Mr. Ukridge doesn't like him, does he?"

"If he does, he dissembles his love. Edwin is Mrs. Ukridge's pet. He is the only subject on which they disagree. Edwin is

certainly in the way on a chicken farm. He has got over his fear of Bob, and is now perfectly lawless. We have to keep a steady eye on him."

"And have you had any success with the incubator? I love incubators. I have always wanted to have one of my own, but we have never kept fowls."

"The incubator has not done all that it should have done," I said. "Ukridge looks after it, and I fancy his methods are not the right methods. I don't know if I have got the figures absolutely correct, but Ukridge reasons on these lines. He says you are supposed to keep the temperature up to a hundred and five degrees. I think he said a hundred and five. Then the eggs are supposed to hatch out in a week or so. He argues that you may just as well keep the temperature at seventy-two, and wait a fortnight for your chickens. I am certain there's a fallacy in the system somewhere, because we never seem to get as far as the chickens. But Ukridge says his theory is mathematically sound, and he sticks to it."

"Are you quite sure that the way you are doing it is the best way to manage a chicken farm?"

"I should very much doubt it. I am a child in these matters. I had only seen a chicken in its wild state once or twice before we came down here. I had never dreamed of being an active assistant on a real farm. The whole thing began like Mr. George Ade's fable of the Author. An Author—myself—was sitting at his desk trying to turn out any old thing that could be converted into breakfast-food, when a friend came in, and sat down on the table, and told him to go right on and not mind him."

"Did Mr. Ukridge do that?"

"Very nearly that. He called at my rooms one beautiful morning when I was feeling desperately tired of London and overworked and dying for a holiday, and suggested that I should come to Combe Regis with him and help him farm chickens. I have not regretted it."

"It is a lovely place, isn't it?"

"The loveliest I have ever seen. How charming your garden is."

"Shall we go and look at it? You have not seen the whole of it."

As she rose, I saw her book, which she had laid face downwards on the grass beside her. It was the same much-enduring copy of the "Manœuvres of Arthur". I was thrilled. This patient perseverance must surely mean something. She saw me looking at it.

"Did you draw Pamela from anybody?" she asked suddenly.

I was glad now that I had not done so. The wretched Pamela, once my pride, was for some reason unpopular with the only critic about whose opinion I cared, and had fallen accordingly from her pedestal.

As we wandered down from the garden paths, she gave me her opinion of the book. In the main it was appreciative. I shall always associate the scent of yellow lupin with the higher criticism.

"Of course, I don't know anything about writing books," she said.

"Yes?" my tone implied, or I hope it did, that she was an expert on books, and that if she was not it didn't matter.

"But I don't think you do your heroines well. I have just got 'The Outsider—' (my other novel. Bastable & Kirby, 6s. Satirical. All about Society—of which I know less than I know about chicken-farming. Slated by *Times* and *Spectator*. Well received by *London Mail* and *Winning Post*)—"and," continued Phyllis, "Lady Maud is exactly the same as Pamela in the 'Manœuvres of Arthur'. I thought you must have drawn both characters from someone you knew."

"No," I said. "No. Purely imaginary."

"I am so glad," said Phyllis.

And then neither of us seemed to have anything to say. My knees began to tremble. I realised that the moment had arrived when my fate must be put to the touch; and I feared that the moment was premature. We cannot arrange these things to suit ourselves. I knew that the time was not yet ripe; but the magic scent of the yellow lupin was too much for me.

"Miss Derrick," I said hoarsely.

Phyllis was looking with more intentness than the attractions of the flower justified at a rose she held in her hand. The bee hummed in the lupin.

"Miss Derrick," I said, and stopped again.

"I say, you people," said a cheerful voice, "tea is ready. Hullo, Garnet, how are you? That medal arrived yet from the Humane Society?"

I spun round. Mr. Tom Chase was standing at the end of the path. The only word that could deal adequately with the situation slapped against my front teeth. I grinned a sickly grin.

"Well, Tom," said Phyllis.

And there was, I thought, just the faintest tinkle of annoyance in her voice.

"I've been bathing," said Mr. Chase, *à propos des bottes*.

"Oh," I replied. "And I wish," I added, "that you'd drowned yourself."

But I added it silently to myself.

13

Tea and Tennis

"MET the professor's late boatman on the Cob," said Mr. Chase, dissecting a chocolate cake.

"Clumsy man," said Phyllis, "I hope he was ashamed of himself. I shall never forgive him for trying to drown papa."

My heart bled for Mr. Henry Hawk, that modern martyr.

"When I met him," said Tom Chase, "he looked as if he had been trying to drown his sorrow as well."

"I knew he drank," said Phyllis severely, "the very first time I saw him."

"You might have warned the professor," murmured Mr. Chase.

"He couldn't have upset the boat if he had been sober."

"You never know. He may have done it on purpose."

"Tom, how absurd."

"Rather rough on the man, aren't you?" I said.

"Merely a suggestion," continued Mr. Chase airily. "I've been reading sensational novels lately, and it seems to me that Mr. Hawk's cut out to be a minion. Probably some secret foe of the professor's bribed him."

My heart stood still. Did he know, I wondered, and was this all a roundabout way of telling me that he knew?

"The professor may be a member of an Anarchist League, or something, and this is his punishment for refusing to assassinate some sportsman."

"Have another cup of tea, Tom, and stop talking nonsense."

Mr. Chase handed in his cup.

"What gave me the idea that the upset was done on purpose was this. I saw the whole thing from the Ware Cliff. The spill looked to me just like dozens I had seen at Malta."

"Why do they upset themselves on purpose at Malta particularly?" inquired Phyllis.

"Listen carefully, my dear, and you'll know more about the ways of the Navy that guards your coasts than you did before. When men are allowed on shore at Malta, the owner has a fancy to see them snugly on board again at a certain reasonable hour. After that hour any Maltese policeman who brings them aboard gets one sovereign, cash. But he has to do all the bringing part of it on his own. Consequence is, you see boats rowing out to the ship, carrying men who have overstayed their leave; and when they get near enough, the able-bodied gentleman in custody jumps to his feet, upsets the boat, and swims for the gangway. The policemen, if they aren't drowned—they sometimes are—race him, and whichever gets there first wins. If it's the policeman, he gets his sovereign. If it's the sailor, he is considered to have arrived not in a state of custody and gets off easier. What a judicious remark that was of the governor of North Carolina to the governor of South Carolina, respecting the length of time between drinks. Just one more cup, please, Phyllis."

"But how does all that apply?" I asked, dry-mouthed.

"Mr. Hawk upset the professor just as those Maltese were upset. There's a patent way of doing it. Furthermore, by judicious questioning, I found that Hawk was once in the Navy, and stationed at Malta. *Now*, who's going to drag in Sherlock Holmes?"

"You don't really think—?" I said, feeling like a criminal in the dock when the case is going against him.

"I think friend Hawk has been re-enacting the joys of his vanished youth, so to speak."

"He ought to be prosecuted," said Phyllis, blazing with indignation.

Alas, poor Hawk!

"Nobody's safe with a man of that sort, hiring out a boat." Oh, miserable Hawk!

"But why on earth should he play a trick like that on Professor Derrick, Chase?"

"Pure animal spirits, probably. Or he may, as I say, be a minion."

I was hot all over.

"I shall tell father that," said Phyllis in her most decided voice, "and see what he says. I don't wonder at the man taking to drink after doing such a thing."

"I—I think you're making a mistake," I said.

"I never make mistakes," Mr. Chase replied. "I am called Archibald the All-Right, for I am infallible. I propose to keep a reflective eye upon the jovial Hawk."

He helped himself to another section of the chocolate cake.

"Haven't you finished *yet*, Tom?" inquired Phyllis. "I'm sure Mr. Garnet's getting tired of sitting talking here," she said.

I shot out a polite negative. Mr. Chase explained with his mouth full that he had by no means finished. Chocolate cake, it appeared, was the dream of his life. When at sea he was accustomed to lie awake o' nights thinking of it.

"You don't seem to realise," he said, "that I have just come from a cruise on a torpedo-boat. There was such a sea on as a rule that cooking operations were entirely suspended, and we lived on ham and sardines—without bread."

"How horrible!"

"On the other hand," added Mr. Chase philosophically, "it didn't matter much, because we were all ill most of the time."

"Don't be nasty, Tom."

"I was merely defending myself. I hope Mr. Hawk will be able to do as well when his turn comes. My aim, my dear Phyllis, is to show you in a series of impressionist pictures the sort of thing I have to go through when I'm not here. Then perhaps you won't rend me so savagely over a matter of five minutes' lateness for breakfast."

"Five minutes! It was three-quarters of an hour, and everything was simply frozen."

"Quite right too in weather like this. You're a slave to convention, Phyllis. You think breakfast ought to be hot, so you always have it hot. On occasion I prefer mine cold. Mine is the truer wisdom. You can give the cook my compliments, Phyllis, and tell her—gently, for I don't wish the glad news to overwhelm her—that I enjoyed that cake. Say that I shall be glad to hear from her again. Care for a game of tennis, Garnet?"

"What a pity Norah isn't here," said Phyllis. "We could have had a four."

"But she is at present wasting her sweetness on the desert air of Yeovil. You had better sit down and watch us, Phyllis. Tennis in this sort of weather is no job for the delicately-nurtured feminine. I will explain the finer points of my play as we go on. Look out particularly for the Tilden Back-Handed Slosh. A winner every time."

We proceeded to the tennis-court. I played with the sun in my eyes. I might, if I chose, emphasise that fact, and attribute my subsequent rout to it, adding, by way of solidifying the excuse, that I was playing in a strange court with a borrowed racquet, and that my mind was preoccupied—firstly, with *l'affaire* Hawk, secondly, and chiefly, with the gloomy thought that Phyllis and my opponent seemed to be on friendly terms with each other. Their manner at tea had been almost that of an engaged couple. There was a thorough understanding between them. I will not, however, take refuge behind excuses. I admit, without qualifying the statement, that Mr. Chase was too good for me. I had always been under the impression that lieutenants in the Royal Navy were not brilliant at tennis. I had met them at various houses, but they had never shone conspicuously. They had played an earnest, unobtrusive game, and generally seemed glad when it was over. Mr. Chase was not of this sort. His service was bottled lightning. His returns behaved like jumping crackers. He won the first game in precisely six strokes. He served. Only once did I take the service with the full face of the racquet, and then I seemed to be stopping a bullet. I returned it into the net. The last of the series struck the wooden edge of my racquet, and soared over the back net into the shrubbery, after the manner of a snick to long slip off a fast bowler.

"Game," said Mr. Chase, "we'll look for that afterwards."

I felt a worm and no man. Phyllis, I thought, would probably judge my entire character from this exhibition. A man, she would reflect, who could be so feeble and miserable a failure at tennis could not be good for much in any department of life. She would compare me instinctively with my opponent, and contrast his

dash and brilliance with my own inefficiency. Somehow the massacre was beginning to have a bad effect on my character. All my self-respect was ebbing. A little more of this, and I should become crushed—a mere human jelly. It was my turn to serve. Service is my strong point at tennis. I am inaccurate, but vigorous, and occasionally send in a quite unplayable shot. One or two of these, even at the expense of a fault or so, and I might be permitted to retain at least a portion of my self-respect.

I opened with a couple of faults. The sight of Phyllis, sitting calm and cool in her chair under the cedar, unnerved me. I served another fault. And yet another.

"Here, I say, Garnet," observed Mr. Chase plaintively, "do put me out of this hideous suspense. I'm becoming a mere bundle of quivering ganglions."

I loathe facetiousness in moments of stress. I frowned austerely, made no reply, and served another fault, my fifth.

Matters had reached a crisis. Even if I had to lob it underhand, I must send the ball over the net with the next stroke.

I restrained myself this time, eschewing the careless vigour which had marked my previous efforts. The ball flew in a slow semi-circle, and pitched inside the correct court. At least, I told myself, I had not served a fault.

What happened then I cannot exactly say. I saw my opponent spring forward like a panther and whirl his racquet. The next moment the back net was shaking violently, and the ball was rolling swiftly along the ground on a return journey to the other court.

"Love-forty," said Mr. Chase. "Phyllis!"

"Yes?"

"That was the Tilden Slosh."

"I thought it must be," said Phyllis.

In the third game I managed to score fifteen. By the merest chance I returned one of his red-hot serves, and—probably through surprise—he failed to send it back again.

In the fourth and fifth games I omitted to score. Phyllis had left the cedar now, and was picking flowers from the beds behind the court.

We began the sixth game. And now for some reason I played really well. I struck a little vein of brilliance. I was serving, and this time a proportion of my serves went over the net instead of trying to get through. The score went from fifteen all to forty-fifteen. Hope began to surge through my veins. If I could keep this up, I might win yet.

The Tilden Slosh diminished my lead by fifteen. The Johnson Slam brought the score to Deuce. Then I got in a really fine serve, which beat him. 'Vantage In. Another Slosh. Deuce. Another Slam. 'Vantage out. It was an awesome moment. There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken by the flood—. I served. Fault. I served again—a beauty. He returned it like a flash into the corner of the court. With a supreme effort I got to it. We rallied. I was playing like a professor. Then whizz—!

The Slosh had beaten me on the post.

"Game *and*—" said Mr. Chase, tossing his racquet into the air and catching it by the handle. "Good game that last one."

I turned to see what Phyllis thought of it.

At the eleventh hour I had shown her of what stuff I was made.

She had disappeared.

"Looking for Miss Derrick?" said Chase, jumping the net, and joining me in my court, "she's gone into the house."

"When did she go?"

"At the end of the fifth game," said Chase.

"Gone to dress for dinner, I suppose," he continued. "It must be getting late. I think I ought to be going, too, if you don't mind The professor gets a little restive if I keep him waiting for his daily bread. Great Scott, that watch can't be right! What do you make it? Yes, so do I. I really think I must run. You won't mind. Good night, then. See you to-morrow, I hope."

I walked slowly out across the fields. That same star, in which I had confided on a former occasion, was at its post. It looked placid and cheerful. *It* never got beaten by six games to love under the very eyes of a lady-star. *It* was never cut out ignominiously by infernally capable lieutenants in His Majesty's Navy. No wonder it was cheerful.

14

A Council of War

"THE fact is," said Ukridge, "if things go on as they are now, my lad, we shall be in the cart. This business wants bucking up. We don't seem to be making headway. Why it is, I don't know, but we are *not* making headway. Of course, what we want is time. If only these scoundrels of tradesmen would leave us alone for a spell we could get things going properly. But we're hampered and rattled and worried all the time. Aren't we, Millie?"

"Yes, dear."

"You don't let me see the financial side of the thing enough," I complained. "Why don't you keep me thoroughly posted? I didn't know we were in such a bad way. The fowls look fit enough, and Edwin hasn't had one for a week."

"Edwin knows as well as possible when he's done wrong, Mr. Garnet," said Mrs. Ukridge. "He was so sorry after he had killed those other two."

"Yes," said Ukridge, "I saw to that."

"As far as I can see," I continued, "we're going strong. Chicken for breakfast, lunch, and dinner is a shade monotonous, perhaps, but look at the business we're doing. We sold a whole heap of eggs last week."

"But not enough, Garny old man. We aren't making our presence felt. England isn't ringing with our name. We sell a dozen eggs where we ought to be selling them by the hundred, carting them off in trucks for the London market and congesting the traffic. Harrod's and Whiteley's and the rest of them are beginning to get on their hind legs and talk. That's what they're doing. Devilish unpleasant they're making themselves. You see, laddie, there's no denying it—we *did* touch them for the deuce of a lot of things on account, and they agreed to take it out in eggs. All they've done so far is to take it out in apologetic letters from Millie. Now, I don't suppose there's a woman alive who can

write a better apologetic letter than her nibs, but, if you're broad-minded and can face facts, you can't help seeing that the juiciest apologetic letter is not an egg. I mean to say, look at it from their point of view. Harrod—or Whiteley—comes into his store in the morning, rubbing his hands expectantly. 'Well,' he says 'how many eggs from Combe Regis to-day?' And instead of leading him off to a corner piled up with bursting crates, they show him a four-page letter telling him it'll all come right in the future. I've never run a store myself, but I should think that would jar a chap. Anyhow, the blighters seem to be getting tired of waiting."

"The last letter from Harrod's was quite pathetic," said Mrs. Ukridge sadly.

I had a vision of an eggless London. I seemed to see homes rendered desolute and lives embittered by the slump, and millionaires bidding against one another for the few rare specimens which Ukridge had actually managed to despatch to Brompton and Bayswater.

Ukridge, having induced himself to be broad-minded for five minutes, now began to slip back to his own personal point of view and became once more the man with a grievance. His fleeting sympathy with the wrongs of Mr. Harrod and Mr. Whiteley disappeared.

"What it all amounts to," he said complainingly, "is that they're infernally unreasonable. I've done everything possible to meet them. Nothing could have been more manly and straightforward than my attitude. I told them in my last letter but three that I proposed to let them have the eggs on the *Times* instalment system, and they said I was frivolous. They said that to send thirteen eggs as payment for goods supplied to the value of £25. 1s. 8½d. was mere trifling. Trifling, I'll trouble you! That's the spirit in which they meet my suggestions. It was Harrod who did that. I've never met Harrod personally, but I'd like to, just to ask him if that's his idea of cementing amiable business relations. He knows just as well as anyone else that without credit commerce has no elasticity. It's an elementary rule. I'll bet he'd have been sick if chappies had refused to let him have tick when he was starting his store. Do you suppose Harrod,

when he started in business, paid cash down on the nail for everything? Not a bit of it. He went about taking people by the coat-button and asking them to be good chaps and wait till Wednesday week. Trifling! Why, those thirteen eggs were absolutely all we had over after Mrs. Beale had taken what she wanted for the kitchen. As a matter of fact, if it's anybody's fault, it's Mrs. Beale's. That woman literally eats eggs."

"The habit is not confined to her," I said.

"Well, what I mean to say is, she seems to bathe in them."

"She says she needs so many for puddings, dear," said Mrs. Ukridge. "I spoke to her about it yesterday. And of course, we often have omelettes."

"She can't make omelettes without breaking eggs," I urged.

"She can't make them without breaking us, dammit," said Ukridge. "One or two more omelettes, and we're done for. No fortune on earth could stand it. We mustn't have any more omelettes, Millie. We must economise. Millions of people get on all right without omelettes. I suppose there are families where, if you suddenly produced an omelette, the whole strength of the company would get up and cheer, led by father. Cancel the omelettes, old girl, from now onward."

"Yes, dear. But—"

"Well?"

"I don't *think* Mrs. Beale would like that very much, dear. She has been complaining a good deal about chicken at every meal. She says that the omelettes are the only things that give her a chance. She says there are always possibilities in an omelette."

"In short," I said, "what you propose to do is deliberately to remove from this excellent lady's life the one remaining element of poetry. You mustn't do it. Give Mrs. Beale her omelettes, and let's hope for a larger supply of eggs."

"Another thing," said Ukridge. "It isn't only that there's a shortage of eggs. That wouldn't matter so much if only we kept hatching out fresh squads of chickens. I'm not saying the hens aren't doing their best. I take off my hat to the hens. As nice a hard-working lot as I ever want to meet, full of vigour and

earnestness. It's that damned incubator that's letting us down all the time. The rotten thing won't work. *I* don't know what's the matter with it. The long and the short of it is that it simply declines to incubate."

"Perhaps it's your dodge of letting down the temperature. You remember, you were telling me? I forget the details."

"My dear old boy," he said earnestly, "there's nothing wrong with my figures. It's a mathematical certainty. What's the good of mathematics if not to help you work out that sort of thing? No, there's something deuced wrong with the machine itself, and I shall probably make a complaint to the people I got it from. Where did we get the incubator, old girl?"

"Harrod's, I think, dear—yes, it was Harrod's. It came down with the first lot of things."

"Then," said Ukridge, banging the table with his fist, while his glasses flashed triumph, "we've got 'em. The Lord has delivered Harrod's into our hand. Write and answer that letter of theirs to-night, Millie. Sit on them."

"Yes, dear."

"Tell 'em that we'd have sent them their confounded eggs long ago, if only their rotten, twopenny-ha'penny incubator had worked with any approach to decency." He paused. "Or would you be sarcastic, Garny, old horse? No, better put it so that they'll understand. Say that I consider that the manufacturer of the thing ought to be in Colney Hatch—if he isn't there already—and that they are scoundrels for palming off a groggy machine of that sort on me."

"The ceremony of opening the morning's letters at Harrod's ought to be full of interest and excitement to-morrow," I said.

This dashing counter-stroke seemed to relieve Ukridge. His pessimism vanished. He seldom looked on the dark side of things for long at a time. He began now to speak hopefully of the future. He planned out ingenious improvements. Our fowls were to multiply so rapidly and consistently that within a short space of time Dorsetshire would be paved with them. Our eggs were to increase in size till they broke records and got three-line notices in the "Items of Interest" column in the *Daily Mail*. Briefly,

each hen was to become a happy combination of rabbit and ostrich.

"There is certainly a good time coming," I said. "May it be soon. Meanwhile, what of the local tradesmen?"

Ukridge relapsed once more into gloom.

"They are the worst of the lot. I don't mind the London people so much. They only write, and a letter or two hurts nobody. But when it comes to butchers and bakers and grocers and fishmongers and fruiterers and whatnot coming up to one's house and dunning one in one's own garden—well, it's a little hard, what?"

"Oh, then those fellows I found you talking to yesterday were duns? I thought they were farmers, come to hear your views on the rearing of poultry."

"Which were they? Little chap with black whiskers and long, thin man with beard? That was Dawlish, the grocer, and Curtis, the fishmonger. The others had gone before you came."

It may be wondered why, before things came to such a crisis, I had not placed my balance at the bank at the disposal of the senior partner for use on behalf of the farm. The fact was that my balance was at the moment small. I have not yet in the course of this narrative gone into my pecuniary position, but I may state here that it was an inconvenient one. It was big with possibilities, but of ready cash there was but a meagre supply. My parents had been poor. But I had a wealthy uncle. Uncles are notoriously careless of the comfort of their nephews. Mine was no exception. He had views. He was a great believer in matrimony, as, having married three wives—not simultaneously—he had every right to be. He was also of opinion that the less money the young bachelor possessed, the better. The consequence was that he announced his intention of giving me a handsome allowance from the day that I married, but not an instant before. Till that glad day I would have to shift for myself. And I am bound to admit that—for an uncle—it was a remarkably sensible idea. I am also of opinion that it is greatly to my credit, and a proof of my pure and unmercenary nature, that I did not instantly put myself up to be raffled for, or rush out into the streets and propose

marriage to the first lady I met. But I was making quite enough with my pen to support myself, and, be it never so humble, there is something pleasant in a bachelor existence, or so I had thought until very recently.

I had thus no great stake in Ukridge's chicken farm. I had contributed a modest five pounds to the preliminary expenses, and another five after the roop incident. But further I could not go with safety. When his income is dependent on the whims of editors and publishers, the prudent man keeps something up his sleeve against a sudden slump in his particular wares. I did not wish to have to make a hurried choice between matrimony and the workhouse.

Having exhausted the subject of finance—or, rather, when I began to feel that it was exhausting me—I took my clubs, and strolled up the hill to the links to play off a match with a sportsman from the village. I had entered some days previously for a competition for a trophy (I quote the printed notice) presented by a local supporter of the game, in which up to the present I was getting on nicely. I had survived two rounds, and expected to beat my present opponent, which would bring me into the semi-final. Unless I had bad luck, I felt that I ought to get into the final, and win it. As far as I could gather from watching the play of my rivals, the professor was the best of them, and I was convinced that I should have no difficulty with him. But he had the most extraordinary luck at golf, though he never admitted it. He also exercised quite an uncanny influence on his opponent. I have seen men put completely off their stroke by his good fortune.

I disposed of my man without difficulty. We parted a little coldly. He had decapitated his brassy on the occasion of his striking Dorsetshire instead of his ball, and he was slow in recovering from the complex emotions which such an episode induces.

In the club-house I met the professor, whose demeanour was a welcome contrast to that of my late antagonist. The professor had just routed his opponent, and so won through to the semi-final. He was warm, but jubilant.

I congratulated him, and left the place.

Phyllis was waiting outside. She often went round the course with him.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Have you been round with the professor?"

"Yes. We must have been in front of you. Father won his match."

"So he was telling me. I was very glad to hear it."

"Did you win, Mr. Garnet?"

"Yes. Pretty easily. My opponent had bad luck all through. Bunkers seemed to have a magnetic attraction for him."

"So you and father are both in the semi-final? I hope you will play very badly."

"Thank you," I said.

"Yes, it does sound rude, doesn't it? But father has set his heart on winning this year. Do you know that he has played in the final round two years running now?"

"Really?"

"Both times he was beaten by the same man."

"Who was that? Mr. Derrick plays a much better game than anybody I have seen on these links."

"It was nobody who is here now. It was a Colonel Jervis. He has not come to Combe Regis this year. That's why father is hopeful."

"Logically," I said, "he ought to be certain to win."

"Yes; but, you see, you were not playing last year, Mr. Garnet."

"Oh, the professor can make rings round me," I said.

"What did you go round in to-day?"

"We were playing match-play, and only did the first dozen holes; but my average round is somewhere in the late eighties."

"The best father has ever done is ninety, and that was only once. So you see, Mr. Garnet, there's going to be another tragedy this year."

"You make me feel a perfect brute. But it's more than likely, you must remember, that I shall fail miserably if I ever do play your father in the final. There are days when I play golf as badly as I play tennis. You'll hardly believe me."

She smiled reminiscently.

"Tom is much too good at tennis. His service is perfectly dreadful."

"It's a little terrifying on first acquaintance."

"But you're better at golf than at tennis, Mr. Garnet. I wish you were not."

"This is special pleading," I said. "It isn't fair to appeal to my better feelings, Miss Derrick."

"I didn't know golfers had any where golf was concerned. Do you really have your off-days?"

"Nearly always. There are days when I slice with my driver as if it were a bread-knife."

"Really?"

"And when I couldn't putt to hit a haystack."

"Then I hope it will be on one of those days that you play father."

"I hope so, too," I said.

"You hope so?"

"Yes."

"But don't you want to win?"

"I should prefer to please you."

"Really, how very unselfish of you, Mr. Garnet," she replied, with a laugh. "I had no idea that such chivalry existed. I thought a golfer would sacrifice anything to win a game."

"Most things."

"And trample on the feelings of anybody."

"Not everybody," I said.

At this point the professor joined us.

15

The Arrival of Nemesis

SOME people do not believe in presentiments. They attribute that curious feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen to such mundane causes as liver, or a chill, or the weather. For my own part, I think there is more in the matter than the casual observer might imagine.

I awoke three days after my meeting with the professor at the club-house, filled with a dull foreboding. Somehow I seemed to know that that day was going to turn out badly for me. It may have been liver or a chill, but it was certainly not the weather. The morning was perfect—the most glorious of a glorious summer. There was a haze over the valley and out to sea which suggested a warm noon, when the sun should have begun the serious duties of the day. The birds were singing in the trees and breakfasting on the lawn, while Edwin, seated on one of the flower-beds, watched them with the eye of a connoisseur. Occasionally, when a sparrow hopped in his direction, he would make a sudden spring, and the bird would fly away to the other side of the lawn. I had never seen Edwin catch a sparrow. I believe they looked on him as a bit of a crank, and humoured him by coming within springing distance, just to keep him amused. Dashing young cock-sparrows would show off before their particular hen-sparrows, and earn a cheap reputation for dare-devilry by going within so many yards of Edwin's lair, and then darting away. Bob was in his favourite place on the gravel. I took him with me down to the Cob to watch me bathe.

"What's the matter with me to-day, Robert, old son?" I asked him, as I dried myself.

He blinked lazily, but contributed no suggestion.

"It's no good looking bored," I went on, "because I'm going to talk about myself, however much it bores you. Here am I, as fit as a prize-fighter, living in the open air for I don't know how

long, eating good plain food—bathing every morning—sea-bathing, mind you—and yet what's the result? I feel beastly."

Bob yawned, and gave a little whine.

"Yes," I said, "I know I'm in love. But that can't be it, because I was in love just as much a week ago, and I felt all right then. But isn't she an angel, Bob? Eh? Isn't she? And didn't you feel bucked when she patted you? Of course you did. Anybody would. But how about Tom Chase? Don't you think he's a dangerous man? He calls her by her Christian name, you know, and behaves generally as if she belonged to him. And then he sees her every day, while I have to trust to meeting her at odd times, and then I generally feel such a fool I can't think of anything to talk about except golf and the weather. He probably sings duets with her after dinner, and you know what comes of duets after dinner."

Here Bob, who had been trying for some time to find a decent excuse for getting away, pretended to see something of importance at the other end of the Cob, and trotted off to investigate it, leaving me to finish dressing by myself.

"Of course," I said to myself, "it may be merely hunger. I may be all right after breakfast. But at present I seem to be working up for a really fine fit of the blues. I feel bad."

I whistled to Bob, and started for home. On the beach I saw the professor some little distance away, and waved my towel in a friendly manner. He made no reply.

Of course, it was possible that he had not seen me; but for some reason his attitude struck me as ominous. As far as I could see, he was looking straight at me, and he was not a short-sighted man. I could think of no reason why he should cut me. We had met on the links on the previous morning, and he had been friendliness itself. He had called me "me dear boy", supplied me with a gin and ginger-beer at the club-house, and generally behaved as if he had been David and I Jonathan. Yet in certain moods we are inclined to make mountains out of molehills, and I went on my way, puzzled and uneasy, with a distinct impression that I had received the cut direct.

I felt hurt. What had I done that Providence should make

things so unpleasant for me? It would be a little hard, as Ukridge would have said, if, after all my trouble, the professor had discovered some fresh grievance against me. Perhaps Ukridge had been irritating him again. I wished he would not identify me so completely with Ukridge. I could not be expected to control the man. Then I reflected that they could hardly have met in the few hours between my parting from the professor at the clubhouse and my meeting with him on the beach. Ukridge rarely left the farm. When he was not working among the fowls, he was lying on his back in the paddock, resting his massive mind.

I came to the conclusion that after all the professor had not seen me.

"I'm an idiot, Bob," I said, as we turned in at the farm gate, "and I let my imagination run away with me."

Bob wagged his tail in approval of the sentiment.

Breakfast was ready when I got in. There was a cold chicken on the sideboard, devilled chicken on the table, a trio of boiled eggs, and a dish of scrambled eggs. As regarded quantity Mrs. Beale never failed us.

Ukridge was sorting the letters.

"Morning, Garny," he said. "One for you, Millie."

"It's from Aunt Elizabeth," said Mrs. Ukridge, looking at the envelope.

I had only heard casual mention of this relative hitherto, but I had built up a mental picture of her partly from remarks which Ukridge had let fall, but principally from the fact that he had named the most malignant hen in our fowl-run after her. A severe lady, I imagined, with a cold eye.

"Wish she'd enclose a cheque," said Ukridge. "She could spare it. You've no idea, Garny, old man, how disgustingly and indecently rich that woman is. She lives in Kensington on an income which would do her well in Park Lane. But as a touching proposition she has proved almost negligible. She steadfastly refuses to part."

"I think she would, dear, if she knew how much we needed it. But I don't like to ask her. She's so curious, and says such horrid things."

"She does," agreed Ukridge, gloomily. He spoke as one who had had experience. "Two for you, Garny. All the rest for me. Ten of them, and all bills."

He spread the envelopes out on the table, and drew one at a venture.

"Whiteley's," he said. "Getting jumpy. Are in receipt of my favour of the 7th inst. and are at a loss to understand. It's rummy about these blighters, but they never seem able to understand a damn thing. It's hard! You put things in words of one syllable for them, and they just goggle and wonder what it all means. They want something on account. Upon my Sam, I'm disappointed with Whiteley's. I'd been thinking in rather a kindly spirit of them, and feeling that they were a more intelligent lot than Harrod's. I'd had half a mind to give Harrod's the miss-in-baulk and hand my whole trade over to these fellows. But not now, dash it! Whiteley's have disappointed me. From the way they write, you'd think they thought I was doing it for fun. How can I let them have their infernal money when there isn't any? Here's one from Dorchester. Smith, the chap we got the gramophone from. Wants to know when I'm going to settle up for sixteen records."

"Sordid brute!"

I wanted to get on with my own correspondence, but Ukridge held me with a glittering eye.

"The chicken-men, the dealer people, you know, want me to pay for the first lot of hens. Considering that they all died of roop, and that I was going to send them back anyhow after I'd got them to hatch out a few chickens, I call that cool. I mean to say, business is business. That's what these fellows don't seem to understand. I can't afford to pay enormous sums for birds which die off quicker than I can get them in."

"I shall never speak to Aunt Elizabeth again," said Mrs. Ukridge suddenly.

She had dropped the letter she had been reading, and was staring indignantly in front of her. There were two little red spots on her cheeks.

"What's the matter, old chap?" inquired Ukridge affection-

ately, glancing up from his pile of bills and forgetting his own troubles in an instant. "Buck up! Aunt Elizabeth been getting on your nerves again? What's she been saying this time?"

Mrs. Ukridge left the room with a sob. Ukridge sprang at the letter.

"If that demon doesn't stop writing her infernal letters and upsetting Millie, I shall strangle her with my bare hands, regardless of her age and sex." He turned over the pages of the letter till he came to the passage which had caused the trouble. "Well, upon my Sam! Listen to this, Garny, old horse. 'You tell me nothing regarding the success of this chicken farm of yours, and I confess that I find your silence ominous. You know my opinion of your husband. He is perfectly helpless in any matter requiring the exercise of a little common sense and business capability.' " He stared at me, amazed. "I like that! 'Pon my soul, that is really rich! I could have believed almost anything of that blighted female, but I did think she had a reasonable amount of intelligence. Why, you know that it's just in matters requiring common sense and business capability that I come out really strong."

"Of course, old man," I replied dutifully. "The woman's a fool."

"That's what she calls me two lines further on. No wonder Millie was upset. Why can't these cats leave people alone?"

"Oh, woman, woman!" I threw in helpfully.

"Always interfering—"

"Rotten!"

"And backbiting—"

"Awful!"

"I shan't stand it."

"I shouldn't!"

"Look here! On the next page she calls me a gaby!"

"It's time you took a strong line."

"And in the very next sentence refers to me as a perfect guffin. What's a guffin, Garny, old boy?"

I considered the point.

"Broadly speaking, I should say, one who guffs."

"I believe it's actionable."

"I shouldn't wonder."

Ukridge rushed to the door.

"Millie!"

He slammed the door, and I heard him dashing upstairs.

I turned to my letters. One was from Lickford, with a Cornish postmark. I glanced through it and laid it aside for a more exhaustive perusal.

The other was in a strange handwriting. I looked at the signature. "Patrick Derrick." This was queer. What had the professor to say to me?

The next moment my heart seemed to spring to my throat.

"Sir," the letter began.

A pleasant, cheery opening!

Then it got off the mark, so to speak, like lightning. There was no sparring for an opening, no dignified parade of set phrases, leading up to the main point. It was the letter of a man who was almost too furious to write. It gave me the impression that, if he had not written it, he would have been obliged to have taken some very violent form of exercise by way of relief to his soul.

"You will be good enough to look on our acquaintance as closed. I have no wish to associate with persons of your stamp. If we should happen to meet, you will be good enough to treat me as a total stranger, as I shall treat you. And, if I may be allowed to give you a word of advice, I should recommend you in future, when you wish to exercise your humour, to do so in some less practical manner than by bribing boatmen to upset your—(*friends* crossed out thickly, and *acquaintances* substituted.) If you require further enlightenment in this matter, the enclosed letter may be of service to you."

With which he remained mine faithfully, Patrick Derrick.

The enclosed letter was from one Jane Muspratt. It was bright and interesting.

"Dear Sir—My Harry, Mr. Hawk, sas to me how it was him upsetting the boat and you, not because he is not steady in a boat which he is no man more so in Combe Regis, but because one of the gentmen what keeps chikkens up the hill, the little one, Mr. Garnick his name is, says to him, Hawk, I'll give you a

sovrin to upset Mr. Derick in your boat, and my Harry being esily led was took in and did, but he's sory now and wishes he hadn't, and he sas he'll niver do a prackticle joke again for anyone even for a banknote.—Yours obedly.,

JANE MUSPRATT."

Oh, woman, woman!

At the bottom of everything! History is full of tragedies caused by the lethal sex. Who lost Mark Antony the world? A woman. Who let Samson in so atrociously? Woman again. Why did Bill Bailey leave home? Once more, because of a woman. And here was I, Jerry Garnet, harmless, well-meaning writer of minor novels, going through the same old mill.

I cursed Jane Muspratt. What chance had I with Phyllis now? Could I hope to win over the professor again? I cursed Jane Muspratt for the second time.

My thoughts wandered to Mr. Harry Hawk. The villain! The scoundrel! What business had he to betray me? . . . Well, I could settle with him. The man who lays a hand upon a woman, save in the way of kindness, is justly disliked by Society; so the woman Muspratt, culpable as she was, was safe from me. But what of the man Hawk? There no such considerations swayed me. I would interview the man Hawk. I would give him the most hectic ten minutes of his career. I would say things to him the recollection of which would make him start up shrieking in his bed in the small hours of the night. I would arise, and be a man, and slay him; take him grossly, full of bread, with all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May; at gaming, swearing, or about some act that had no relish of salvation in it.

The Demon!

My life—ruined. My future—grey and blank. My heart—shattered. And why? Because of the scoundrel, Hawk.

Phyllis would meet me in the village, on the Cob, on the links, and pass by as if I were the Invisible Man. And why? Because of the reptile, Hawk. The worm, Hawk. The dastard and varlet, Hawk.

I crammed my hat on, and hurried out of the house towards the village.

16

A Chance Meeting

I ROAMED the place in search of the varlet for the space of half-an-hour, and, after having drawn all his familiar haunts, found him at length leaning over the sea-wall near the church, gazing thoughtfully into the waters below.

I confronted him.

"Well," I said, "you're a beauty, aren't you?"

He eyed me owlishly. Even at this early hour, I was grieved to see, he showed signs of having looked on the bitter while it was brown. His eyes were filmy, and his manner aggressively solemn.

"Beauty?" he echoed.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Say f'self."

It was plain that he was engaged in pulling his faculties together by some laborious process known only to himself. At present my words conveyed no meaning to him. He was trying to identify me. He had seen me before somewhere, he was certain, but he could not say where, or who I was.

"I want to know," I said, "what induced you to be such an abject idiot as to let our arrangement get known?"

I spoke quietly. I was not going to waste the choicer flowers of speech on a man who was incapable of understanding them. Later on, when he had awakened to a sense of his position, I would begin really to talk to him.

He continued to stare at me. Then a sudden flash of intelligence lit up his features.

"Mr. Garnick," he said.

"You've got it at last."

"From ch—chicken farm," he continued, with the triumphant air of a cross-examining King's Counsel who has at last got on the track.

"Yes," I said.

"Up top the hill," he proceeded, clinchingly. He stretched out a huge hand.

"How you?" he inquired with a friendly grin.

"I want to know," I said distinctly, "what you've got to say for yourself after letting our affair with the professor become public property?"

He paused awhile in thought.

"Dear sir," he said at last, as if he were dictating a letter, "dear sir, I owe you—ex—exp——"

He waved his hand, as who should say, "It's a stiff job, but I'm going to do it."

"Explashion," he said.

"You do," said I grimly. "I should like to hear it."

"Dear sir, listen me."

"Go on then."

"You came me. You said 'Hawk, Hawk, ol' fren', listen me. You tip this ol' bufflehead into watter,' you said, 'an' gormed if I don't give 'ee a poond note.' That's what you said me. Isn't that what you said me?"

I did not deny it.

" 'Ve' well,' I said you. 'Right,' I said. I tipped the ol' soul into watter, and I got the poond note."

"Yes, you took care of that. All this is quite true, but it's beside the point. We are not disputing about what happened. What I want to know—for the third time—is what made you let the cat out of the bag? Why couldn't you keep quiet about it?"

He waved his hand.

"Dear sir," he replied, "this way. Listen me."

It was a tragic story that he unfolded. My wrath ebbed as I listened. After all the fellow was not so greatly to blame. I felt that in his place I should have acted as he had done. It was Fate's fault, and Fate's alone.

It appeared that he had not come well out of the matter of the accident. I had not looked at it hitherto from his point of view. While the rescue had left me the popular hero, it had had quite the opposite result for him. He had upset his boat and would have

drowned his passenger, said public opinion, if the young hero from London—myself—had not plunged in, and at the risk of his life brought the professor ashore. Consequently, he was despised by all as an inefficient boatman. He became a laughing-stock. The local wags made laborious jests when he passed. They offered him fabulous sums to take their worst enemies out for a row with him. They wanted to know when he was going to school to learn his business. In fact, they behaved as wags do and always have done at all times all the world over.

Now, all this, it seemed, Mr. Hawk would have borne cheerfully and patiently for my sake, or, at any rate for the sake of the crisp pound note I had given him. But a fresh factor appeared in the problem, complicating it grievously. To wit, Miss Jane Muspratt.

"She said to me," explained Mr. Hawk, with pathos, " 'Harry 'Awk,' she said, 'yeou'm a girt fule, an' I don't marry noone as is ain't to be trusted in a boat by hisself, and what has jokes made about him by that Tom Leigh!' " "I punched Tom Leigh," observed Mr. Hawk parenthetically. " 'So,' she said me, 'you can go away, an' I don't want to see yeou again!' "

This heartless conduct on the part of Miss Muspratt had had the natural result of making him confess in self-defence; and she had written to the professor the same night.

I forgave Mr. Hawk, I think he was hardly sober enough to understand, for he betrayed no emotion. "It is Fate, Hawk," I said, "simply Fate. There is a Divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will, and it's no good grumbling."

"Yiss," said Mr. Hawk, after chewing this sentiment for a while in silence, "so she said me, 'Hawk,' she said—like that—'you're a girt fule——' "

"That's all right," I replied. "I quite understand. As I say, it's simply Fate. Good-bye." And I left him.

As I was going back, I met the professor and Phyllis. They passed me without a look.

I wandered on in quite a fervour of self-pity. I was in one of those moods when life suddenly seems to become irksome, when the future stretches blank and grey in front of one. I should have liked to have faded almost imperceptibly from the world, like

Mr. Bardell, even if, as in his case, it had involved being knocked on the head with a pint pot in a public-house cellar.

In such a mood it is imperative that one should seek distraction. The shining example of Mr. Harry Hawk did not lure me. Taking to drink would be a nuisance. Work was what I wanted. I would toil like a navvy all day among the fowls, separating them when they fought, gathering in the eggs when they laid, chasing them across country when they got away, and even, if necessity arose, painting their throats with turpentine when they were stricken with roop. Then, after dinner, when the lamps were lit, and Mrs. Ukridge nursed Edwin and sewed, and Ukridge smoked cigars and incited the gramophone to murder "Mumbling Mose", I would steal away to my bedroom and write—and write—and *write*. And go on writing till my fingers were numb and my eyes refused to do their duty. And, when time had passed, I might come to feel that it was all for the best. A man must go through the fire before he can write his masterpiece. We learn in suffering what we teach in song. What we lose on the swings we make up on the roundabouts. Jerry Garnet, the Man, might become a depressed, hopeless wreck, with the iron planted immovably in his soul; but Jeremy Garnet, the Author, should turn out such a novel of gloom, that strong critics would weep, and the public jostle for copies till Mudie's doorway became a shambles.

Thus might I some day feel that all this anguish was really a blessing—effectively disguised.

But I doubted it.

We were none of us very cheerful now at the farm. Even Ukridge's spirit was a little daunted by the bills which poured in by every post. It was as if the tradesmen of the neighbourhood had formed a league, and were working in concert. Or it may have been due to thought-waves. Little accounts came not in single spies but in battalions. The popular demand for a sight of the colour of his money grew daily. Every morning at breakfast he would give us fresh bulletins of the state of mind of each of our creditors, and thrill us with the announcement that Whiteley's

were getting cross, and Harrod's jumpy or that the bearings of Dawlish, the grocer, were becoming overheated. We lived in a continual atmosphere of worry. Chicken and nothing but chicken at meals, and chicken and nothing but chicken between meals had frayed our nerves. An air of defeat hung over the place. We were a beaten side, and we realised it. We had been playing an uphill game for nearly two months, and the strain was beginning to tell. Ukridge became uncannily silent. Mrs. Ukridge, though she did not understand, I fancy, the details of the matter, was worried because Ukridge was. Mrs. Beale had long since been turned into a soured cynic by the lack of chances vouchsafed her for the exercise of her art. And as for me, I have never since spent so profoundly miserable a week. I was not even permitted the anodyne of work. There seemed to be nothing to do on the farm. The chickens were quite happy, and only asked to be let alone and allowed to have their meals at regular intervals. And every day one or more of their number would vanish into the kitchen, Mrs. Beale would serve up the corpse in some cunning disguise, and we would try to delude ourselves into the idea that it was something altogether different.

There was one solitary gleam of variety in our menu. An editor sent me a cheque for a set of verses. We cashed that cheque and trooped round the town in a body, laying out the money. We bought a leg of mutton, and a tongue and sardines, and pineapple chunks, and potted meat, and many other noble things, and had a perfect banquet. Mrs. Beale, with the scenario of a smile on her face, the first that she had worn in these days of stress, brought in the joint, and uncovered it with an air.

"Thank God!" said Ukridge, as he began to carve.

It was the first time I had ever heard him say a grace, and if ever an occasion merited such a deviation from habit, this occasion did.

After that we relapsed into routine again.

Deprived of physical labour, with the exception of golf and bathing—trivial sports compared with work in the fowl-run at its hardest—I tried to make up for it by working at my novel.

It refused to materialise.

The only progress I achieved was with my villain.

I drew him from the professor, and made him a blackmailer. He had several other social defects, but that was his profession. That was the thing he did really well.

It was on one of the many occasions on which I had sat in my room, pen in hand, through the whole of a lovely afternoon, with no better result than a slight headache, that I bethought me of that little paradise on the Ware Cliff, hung over the sea and backed by green woods. I had not been there for some time, owing principally to an entirely erroneous idea that I could do more solid work sitting in a straight hard chair at a table than lying on soft turf with the sea wind in my eyes.

But now the desire to visit that little clearing again drove me from my room. In the drawing-room below the gramophone was dealing brassily with "Mister Blackman". Outside the sun was just thinking of setting. The Ware Cliff was the best medicine for me. What does Kipling say?

> "And soon you will find that the sun and the wind
> And the Djinn of the Garden, too,
> Have lightened the hump, Cameelious Hump,
> The Hump that is black and blue"

His instructions include digging with a hoe and a shovel also, but I could omit that. The sun and the wind were what I needed.

I took the upper road. In certain moods I preferred it to the path along the cliff. I walked fast. The exercise was soothing.

To reach my favourite clearing I had to take to the fields on the left, and strike down hill in the direction of the sea. I hurried down the narrow path.

I broke into the clearing at a jog trot, and stood panting. And at the same moment, looking cool and beautiful in her white dress, Phyllis entered in from the other side. Phyllis—without the professor.

17

Of a Sentimental Nature

SHE was wearing a panama, and she carried a sketching-block and camp-stool.

"Good evening," I said.

"Good evening," said she.

It is curious how different the same words can sound, when spoken by different people. My "good evening" might have been that of a man with a particularly guilty conscience caught in the act of doing something more than usually ignoble. She spoke like a rather offended angel.

"It's a lovely evening," I went on pluckily.

"Very."

"The sunset!"

"Yes."

"Er—"

She raised a pair of blue eyes, devoid of all expression save a faint suggestion of surprise, and gazed through me for a moment at some object a couple of thousand miles away, and lowered them again, leaving me with a vague feeling that there was something wrong with my personal appearance.

Very calmly she moved to the edge of the cliff, arranged her camp-stool, and sat down. Neither of us spoke a word. I watched her while she filled a little mug with water from a little bottle, opened her paint-box, selected a brush, and placed her sketching-block in position.

She began to paint.

Now, by all the laws of good taste, I should before this have made a dignified exit. It was plain that I was not regarded as an essential ornament of this portion of the Ware Cliff. By now, if I had been the Perfect Gentleman, I ought to have been a quarter of a mile away.

But there is a definite limit to what a man can do. I remained.

The sinking sun flung a carpet of gold across the sea. Phyllis's hair was tinged with it. Little waves tumbled lazily on the beach below. Except for the song of a distant blackbird, running through its repertoire before retiring for the night, everything was silent.

She sat there, dipping and painting and dipping again, with never a word for me—standing patiently and humbly behind her.

"Miss Derrick," I said.

She half turned her head.

"Yes."

"Why won't you speak to me?" I said.

"I don't understand you."

"Why won't you speak to me?"

"I think you know, Mr. Garnet."

"It is because of that boat accident?"

"Accident!"

"Episode," I amended.

She went on painting in silence. From where I stood I could see her profile. Her chin was tilted. Her expression was determined.

"Is it?" I said.

"Need we discuss it?"

"Not if you do not wish it."

I paused.

"But," I added, "I should have liked a chance to defend myself. . . What glorious sunsets there have been these last few days. I believe we shall have this sort of weather for another month."

"I should not have thought that possible."

"The glass is going up," I said.

"I was not talking about the weather."

"It was dull of me to introduce such a worn-out topic."

"You said you could defend yourself."

"I said I should like the chance to do so."

"You have it."

"That's very kind of you. Thank you."

"Is there any reason for gratitude?"

"Every reason."

"Go on, Mr. Garnet. I can listen while I paint. But please sit down. I don't like being talked to from a height."

I sat down on the grass in front of her, feeling as I did so that the change of position in a manner clipped my wings. It is difficult to speak movingly while sitting on the ground. Instinctively I avoided eloquence. Standing up, I might have been pathetic and pleading. Sitting down, I was compelled to be matter-of-fact.

"You remember, of course, the night you and Professor Derrick dined with us? When I say dined, I use the word in a loose sense."

For a moment I thought she was going to smile. We were both thinking of Edwin. But it was only for a moment, and then her face grew cold once more, and the chin resumed its angle of determination.

"Yes," she said.

"You remember the unfortunate ending of the festivities?"

"Well?"

"If you recall that at all clearly, you will also remember that the fault was not mine, but Ukridge's."

"Well?"

"It was his behaviour that annoyed Professor Derrick. The position, then, was this, that I was to be cut off from the pleasantest friendship I had ever formed——"

I stopped for a moment. She bent a little lower over her easel, but remained silent.

"——Simply through the tactlessness of a prize idiot."

"I like Mr. Ukridge."

"I like him, too. But I can't pretend that he is anything but an idiot at times."

"Well?"

"I naturally wished to mend matters. It occurred to me that an excellent way would be by doing your father a service. It was seeing him fishing that put the idea of a boat-accident into my head. I hoped for a genuine boat-accident. But those things only happen when one does not want them. So I determined to engineer one."

"You didn't think of the shock to my father."

"I did. It worried me very much."

"But you upset him all the same."

"Reluctantly."

She looked up, and our eyes met. I could detect no trace of forgiveness in hers.

"You behaved abominably," she said.

"I played a risky game, and I lost. And I shall now take the consequences. With luck I should have won. I did not have luck, and I am not going to grumble about it. But I am grateful to you for letting me explain. I should not have liked you to have gone on thinking that I played practical jokes on my friends. That is all I have to say, I think. It was kind of you to listen. Good-bye, Miss Derrick."

I got up.

"Are you going?"

"Why not?"

"Please sit down again."

"But you wish to be alone——"

"Please sit down!"

There was a flush on the cheek turned towards me, and the chin was tilted higher.

I sat down.

To westward the sky had changed to the hue of a bruised cherry. The sun had sunk below the horizon, and the sea looked cold and leaden. The blackbird had long since flown.

"I am glad you told me, Mr. Garnet."

She dipped her brush in the water.

"Because I don't like to think badly of—people."

She bent her head over her painting.

"Though I still think you behaved very wrongly. And I am afraid my father will never forgive you for what you did."

Her father! As if he counted.

"But you do?" I said eagerly.

"I think you are less to blame than I thought you were at first."

"No more than that?"

"You can't expect to escape all consequences. You did a very stupid thing."

"I was tempted."

The sky was a dull grey now. It was growing dusk. The grass on which I sat was wet with dew.

I stood up.

"Isn't it getting a little dark for painting?" I said. "Are you sure you won't catch cold? It's very damp."

"Perhaps it is. And it is late, too."

She shut her paint-box, and emptied the little mug on to the grass.

"May I carry your things?" I said.

I think she hesitated, but only for a moment.

I possessed myself of the camp-stool, and we started on our homeward journey.

We were both silent. The spell of the quiet summer evening was on us.

" 'And all the air a solemn stillness holds,' " she said softly. "I love this cliff, Mr. Garnet. It's the most soothing place in the world."

"I found it so this evening."

She glanced at me quickly.

"You're not looking well," she said. "Are you sure you are not overworking yourself?"

"No, it's not that."

Somehow we had stopped, as if by agreement, and were facing each other. There was a look in her eyes I had never seen there before. The twilight hung like a curtain between us and the world. We were alone together in a world of our own.

"It is because I had offended you," I said.

She laughed a high, unnatural laugh.

"I have loved you ever since I first saw you," I said doggedly.

18

Ukridge Gives Me Advice

HOURS after—or so it seemed to me—we reached the spot at which our ways divided. We stopped, and I felt as if I had been suddenly cast back into the workaday world from some distant and pleasanter planet. I think Phyllis must have felt much the same sensation, for we both became on the instant intensely practical and businesslike.

"But about your father," I said.

"That's the difficulty."

"He won't give us his consent?"

"I'm afraid he wouldn't dream of it."

"You can't persuade him?"

"I can in most things, but not in this. You see, even if nothing had happened, he wouldn't like to lose me just yet, because of Norah."

"Norah?"

"My sister. She's going to be married in October. I wonder if we shall ever be as happy as they will."

"Happy! They will be miserable compared with us. Not that I know who the man is."

"Why, Tom, of course. Do you mean to say you really didn't know?"

"Tom! Tom Chase?"

"Of course."

I gasped.

"Well, I'm—hanged," I said. "When I think of the torments I've been through because of that wretched man, and all for nothing, I don't know what to say."

"Don't you like Tom?"

"Very much. I always did. But I was awfully jealous of him."

"You weren't! How silly of you."

"Of course I was. He was always about with you, and called you Phyllis, and generally behaved as if you and he were the heroine and hero of a musical comedy, so what else could I think? I heard you singing duets after dinner once. I drew the worst conclusions."

"When was that? What were you doing there?"

"It was shortly after Ukridge had got on your father's nerves, and nipped our acquaintance in the bud. I used to come every night to the hedge opposite your drawing-room window, and brood there by the hour."

"Poor old boy!"

"Hoping to hear you sing. And when you did sing, and he joined in all flat, I used to swear. You'll probably find most of the bark scorched off the tree I leaned against."

"Poor old man! Still, it's all over now, isn't it?"

"And when I was doing my very best to show off before you at tennis, you went away just as I got into form."

"I'm very sorry, but I couldn't know, could I? I thought you always played like that."

"I know. I knew you would. It nearly turned my hair white. I didn't see how a girl could ever care for a man who was so bad at tennis."

"One doesn't love a man because he's good at tennis."

"What *does* a girl see to love in a man?" I inquired abruptly; and paused on the verge of a great discovery.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied, most unsatisfactorily.

And I could draw no views from her.

"But about father," said she. "What *are* we to do?"

"He objects to me."

"He's perfectly furious with you."

"Blow, blow," I said, "thou winter wind. Thou are not so unkind——"

"He'll never forgive you."

"—As man's ingratitude. I saved his life. At the risk of my own. Why, I believe I've got a legal claim on him. Who ever heard of a man having his life saved, and not being delighted when his preserver wanted to marry his daughter? Your father is striking

at the very root of the short-story writer's little earnings. He mustn't be allowed to do it."

"Jerry!"

I started.

"Again!" I said.

"What?"

"Say it again. Do, please. Now."

"Very well. Jerry!"

"It was the first time you had called me by my Christian name. I don't suppose you've the remotest notion how splendid it sounds when you say it. There is something poetical, almost holy, about it."

"Jerry, please!"

"Say on."

"Do be sensible. Don't you see how serious this is? We must think how we can make father consent."

"All right," I said. "We'll tackle the point. I'm sorry to be frivolous, but I'm so happy I can't keep it all in. I've got you, and I can't think of anything else."

"Try."

"I'll pull myself together . . . Now, say on once more."

"We can't marry without his consent."

"Why not?" I said, not having a marked respect for the professor's whims. "Gretna Green is out of date, but there are registrars."

"I hate the very idea of a registrar," she said with decision. "Besides——"

"Well?"

"Poor father would never get over it. We've always been such friends. If I married against his wishes, he would—oh, you know. Not let me near him again, and not write to me. And he would hate it all the time he was doing it. He would be bored to death without me."

"Who wouldn't?" I said.

"Because, you see, Norah has never been quite the same. She has spent such a lot of her time on visits to people that she and father don't understand each other so well as he and I do. She

would try and be nice to him, but she wouldn't know him as I do. And, besides, she will be with him such a little, now she's going to be married."

"But, look here," I said, "this is absurd. You say your father would never see you again, and so on, if you married me. Why? It's nonsense. It isn't as if I were a sort of social outcast. We were the best of friends till that man Hawk gave me away like that."

"I know. But he's very obstinate about some things. You see, he thinks the whole thing has made him look ridiculous, and it will take him a long time to forgive you for that."

I realised the truth of this. One can pardon any injury to oneself, unless it hurts one's vanity. Moreover, even in a genuine case of rescue, the rescued man must always feel a little aggrieved with his rescuer, when he thinks the matter over in cold blood. He must regard him unconsciously as the super regards the actor-manager, indebted to him for the means of supporting existence, but grudging him the limelight and the centre of the stage and the applause. Besides, everyone instinctively dislikes being under an obligation which they can never wholly repay. And when a man discovers that he has experienced all these mixed sensations for nothing, as the professor had done, his wrath is likely to be no slight thing.

Taking everything into consideration, I could not but feel that it would require more than a little persuasion to make the professor bestow his blessing with that genial warmth which we like to see in our fathers-in-law elect.

"You don't think," I said, "that time, the Great Healer, and so on—? He won't feel kindlier disposed towards me—say in a month's time?"

"Of course he *might*," said Phyllis; but she spoke doubtfully.

"He strikes me from what I have seen of him as a man of moods. I might do something one of these days which would completely alter his views. We will hope for the best."

"About telling father——?"

"Need we, do you think?" I said.

"Yes, we must. I couldn't bear to think that I was keeping it

from him. I don't think I've ever kept anything from him in my life. Nothing bad, I mean."

"You count this among your darker crimes, then?"

"I was looking at it from father's point of view. He will be awfully angry. I don't know how I shall begin telling him."

"Good heavens!" I cried, "you surely don't think I'm going to let you do that! Keep safely out of the way while you tell him! Not much. I'm coming back with you now, and we'll break the bad news together."

"No, not to-night. He may be tired and rather cross. We had better wait till to-morrow. You might speak to him in the morning."

"Where shall I find him?"

"He is certain to go to the beach before breakfast for a swim."

"Good. I'll be there."

"Ukridge," I said, when I got back, "I want your advice."

It stirred him like a trumpet blast. I suppose, when a man is in the habit of giving unsolicited counsel to everyone he meets, it is as invigorating as an electric shock to him to be asked for it spontaneously.

"Bang it out, laddie!" he replied cordially. "I'm with you. Here, come along into the garden, and state your case."

This suited me. It is always easier to talk intimately in the dark, and I did not wish to be interrupted by the sudden entrance of the Hired Man or Mrs. Beale, of which there was always a danger indoors. We walked down to the paddock. Ukridge lit a cigar.

"Ukridge," I said, "I'm engaged!"

"What!" A huge hand whistled through the darkness and smote me heavily between the shoulder-blades. "By Jove, old boy, I wish you luck. 'Pon my Sam I do! Best thing in the world for you. Bachelors are mere excrescences. Never knew what happiness was till I married. When's the wedding to be?"

"That's where I want your advice. What you might call a difficulty has arisen about the wedding. It's like this. I'm engaged to Phyllis Derrick."

"Derrick? Derrick?"

"You can't have forgotten her! Good Lord, what eyes some men have! Why, if I'd only seen her once, I should have remembered her all my life."

"I know, now. Rather a pretty girl, with blue eyes."

I started at him blankly. It was not much good, as he could not see my face, but it relieved me. "Rather a pretty girl!" What a description!

"Of course, yes," continued Ukridge. "She came to dinner here one night with her father, that fat little buffer."

"As you were careful to call him to his face at the time, confound you! It was that that started all the trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"Why, her father. . . . "

"By Jove, I remember now! So worried lately, old boy, that my memory's gone groggy. Of course! Her father fell into the sea, and you fished him out. Why, damme, it's like the stories you read."

"It's also very like the stories I used to write. But they had one point about them which this story hasn't. They invariably ended happily, with the father joining the hero's and heroine's hands and giving his blessing. Unfortunately, in the present case, that doesn't seem likely to happen."

"The old man won't give his consent?"

"I'm afraid not. I haven't asked him yet, but the chances are against it."

"But why? What's the matter with you? You're an excellent chap, sound in wind and limb, and didn't you once tell me that, if you married, you came into a pretty sizeable bit of money?"

"Yes, I do. That part of it is all right."

Ukridge's voice betrayed perplexity.

"I don't understand this thing, old horse," he said. "I should have thought the old boy would have been all over you. Why, damme, I never heard of anything like it. You saved his life! You fished him out of the water."

"After chucking him in. That's the trouble."

"You chucked him in?"

"By proxy."

I explained. Ukridge, I regret to say, laughed in a way that must have been heard miles away in distant villages in Devonshire.

"You devil!" he bellowed. " 'Pon my Sam, old horse, to look at you one would never have thought you'd have had it in you."

"I can't help looking respectable."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"That's where I wanted your advice. You're a man of resource. What would you do in my place?"

Ukridge tapped me impressively on the shoulder.

"Laddie," he said, "there's one thing that'll carry you through any mess."

"And that is——?"

"Cheek, my boy, cheek. Gall. Nerve. Why, take my case. I never told you how I came to marry, did I? I thought not. Well, it was this way. It'll do you a bit of good, perhaps, to hear the story, for, mark you, blessings weren't going cheap in my case either. You know Millie's Aunt Elizabeth, the female who wrote that letter? Well, when I tell you that she was Millie's nearest relative and that it was her consent I had to snaffle, you'll see that I was faced with a bit of a problem."

"Let's have it," I said.

"Well, the first time I ever saw Millie was in a first-class carriage on the underground. I'd got a third-class ticket, by the way. The carriage was full, and I got up and gave her my seat, and, as I hung suspended over her by a strap, damme, I fell in love with her then and there. You've no conception, laddie, how indescribably ripping she looked, in a sort of blue dress with a bit of red in it and a hat with thingummies. Well, we both got out at South Kensington. By that time I was gasping for air and saw that the thing wanted looking into. I'd never had much time to bother about women, but I realised that this must not be missed. I was in love, old horse. It comes over you quite suddenly, like a tidal wave . . . "

"I know! I know! Good Heavens, you can't tell me anything about that."

"Well, I followed her. She went to a house in Thurloe Square. I waited outside and thought it over. I had got to get into that shanty and make her acquaintance, if they threw me out on my ear. So I rang the bell. 'Is Lady Lichenhall at home?' I asked. You spot the devilish cunning of the ruse, what? My asking for a female with a title was to make 'em think I was one of the Upper Ten."

"How were you dressed?" I could not help asking.

"Oh, it was one of my frock-coat days. I'd been to see a man about tutoring his son, and by a merciful dispensation of Providence there was a fellow living in the same boarding-house with me who was about my build and had a frock-coat, and he had lent it to me. At least, he hadn't exactly lent it to me, but I knew where he kept it and he was out at the time. There was nothing the matter with my appearance. Quite the young duke, I assure you, laddie, down to the last button. 'Is Lady Lichenhall at home?' I asked. 'No,' said the maid, 'nobody of that name here. This is Lady Lakenheath's house.' So, you see, I had a bit of luck at the start, because the names were a bit alike. Well, I got the maid to show me in somehow, and, once in you can bet I talked for all I was worth. Kept up a flow of conversation about being misdirected and coming to the wrong house. Went away, and called a few days later. Gradually wormed my way in. Called regularly. Spied on their movements, met 'em at every theatre they went to, and bowed, and finally got away with Millie before her aunt knew what was happening or who I was or what I was doing or anything."

"And what's the moral?"

"Why, go in like a mighty, rushing wind! Bustle 'em! Don't give 'em a moment's rest or time to think or anything. Why, if I'd given Millie's Aunt Elizabeth time to think, where should we have been? Not at Combe Regis together, I'll bet. You heard that letter, and know what she thinks of me now, on reflection. If I'd gone slow and played a timid waiting-game, she'd have thought that before I married Millie, instead of afterwards. I give you my honest word, laddie, that there was a time, towards the middle of our acquaintance—after she had stopped mixing me up

with the man who came to wind the clocks—when that woman ate out of my hand! Twice—on two separate occasions—she actually asked my advice about feeding her toy Pomeranian! Well, that shows you! Bustle 'em, laddie! Bustle 'em!"

"Ukridge," I said, "you inspire me. You would inspire a caterpillar. I will go to the professor—I was going anyhow, but now I shall go aggressively. I will prise a father's blessing out of him, if I have to do it with a crowbar."

"That's the way to talk, old horse. Don't beat about the bush. Tell him exactly what you want and stand no nonsense. If you don't see what you want in the window, ask for it. Where did you think of tackling him?"

"Phyllis tells me that he always goes for a swim before breakfast. I thought of going down to-morrow and waylaying him."

"You couldn't do better. By Jove!" said Ukridge suddenly. "I'll tell you what I'll do, laddie. I wouldn't do it for everybody, but I look on you as a favourite son. I'll come with you, and help break the ice."

"What!"

"Don't you be under any delusion, old horse," said Ukridge paternally. "You haven't got an easy job in front of you, and what you'll need more than anything else, when you really get down to brass-tacks, is a wise, kindly man of the world at your elbow, to whoop you on when your nerve fails you and generally stand in your corner and see that you get a fair show."

"But it's rather an intimate business. . . ."

"Never mind! Take my tip and have me at your side. I can say things about you that you would be too modest to say for yourself. I can plead your cause, laddie. I can point out in detail all that the old boy will be missing if he gives you the miss-in-baulk. Well, that's settled, then. About eight to-morrow morning, what? I'll be there, my boy. A swim will do me good."

19

Asking Papa

REVIEWING the matter later, I could see that I made one or two blunders in my conduct of the campaign to win over Professor Derrick. In the first place, I made a bad choice of time and place. At the moment this did not strike me. It is a simple matter, I reflected, for a man to pass another by haughtily and without recognition, when they meet on dry land; but, when the said man, being it should be remembered, an indifferent swimmer, is accosted in the water and out of his depth, the feat becomes a hard one. It seemed to me that I should have a better chance with the professor in the water than out of it.

My second mistake—and this was brought home to me almost immediately—was in bringing Ukridge along. Not that I really brought him along; it was rather a case of being unable to shake him off. When he met me on the gravel outside the house at a quarter to eight on the following morning, clad in a dingy mackintosh which, swinging open, revealed a purple bathing-suit, I confess that my heart sank. Unfortunately, all my efforts to dissuade him from accompanying me were attributed by him to a pardonable nervousness—or, as he put it, to the needle.

"Buck up, laddie!" he roared encouragingly. "I had anticipated this. Something seemed to tell me that your nerve would go when it came to the point. You're deuced lucky, old horse, to have a man like me at your side. Why, if you were alone, you wouldn't have a word to say for yourself. You'd just gape at the man and yammer. But I'm with you, laddie, I'm with you. If your flow of conversation dries up, count on me to keep the thing going."

And so it came about that, having reached the Cob and spying in the distance the grey head of the professor bobbing about on the face of the waters, we dived in and swam rapidly towards him.

His face was turned in the opposite direction when we came up with him. He was floating peacefully on his back, and it was plain that he had not observed our approach. For when, treading water easily in his rear, I wished him good morning in my most conciliatory tone, he stood not upon the order of his sinking, but went under like so much pig-iron.

I waited courteously until he rose to the surface again, when I repeated my remark.

He expelled the last remnant of water from his mouth with a wrathful splutter, and cleared his eyes with the back of his hand. I confess to a slight feeling of apprehension as I met his gaze. Nor was my uneasiness diminished by the spectacle of Ukridge splashing tactfully in the background like a large seal. Ukridge so far had made no remarks. He had dived in very flat, and I imagine that his breath had not yet returned to him. He had the air of one who intends to get used to his surroundings before trusting himself to speech.

"The water is delightfully warm," I said.

"Oh, it's you!" said the professor; and I could not cheat myself into the belief that he spoke cordially. Ukridge snorted loudly in the offing. The professor turned sharply, as if anxious to observe this marine phenomenon; and the annoyed gurgle which he gave showed that he was not approving of Ukridge either. I did not approve of Ukridge myself. I wished he had not come. Ukridge, in the water, lacks dignity. I felt that he prejudiced my case.

"You are swimming splendidly this morning," I went on perseveringly, feeling that an ounce of flattery is worth a pound of rhetoric. "If," I added, "you will allow me to say so."

"I will not!" he snapped. "I—" here a small wave, noticing that his mouth was open, stepped in. "I wish," he resumed warmly, "as I said in me letter, to have nothing to do with you. I consider that ye've behaved in a manner that can only be described as abominable, and I will thank you to leave me alone."

"But allow me——"

"I will not allow ye, sir. I will allow ye nothing. Is it not enough to make me the laughing-stock, the butt, sir, of this town,

without pursuing me in this way when I wish to enjoy a quiet swim?"

"Now, laddie, laddie," said Ukridge, placing a large hand on his shoulder, "these are harsh words! Be reasonable! Think before you speak. You little know . . . "

"Go to the devil!" said the professor. "I wish to have nothing to do with either of you. I should be glad if you would cease this persecution. Persecution, sir!"

His remarks, which I have placed on paper as if they were continuous and uninterrupted, were punctuated in reality by a series of gasps and puffings, as he received and ejected the successors of the wave he had swallowed at the beginning of our little chat. The art of conducting conversation while in the water is not given to every swimmer. This he seemed to realise, for, as if to close the interview, he proceeded to make his way as quickly as he could to the shore. Unfortunately, his first dash brought him squarely up against Ukridge, who, not having expected the collision, clutched wildly at him and took him below the surface again. They came up a moment later on the worst terms.

"Are you trying to drown me, sir?" barked the professor.

"My dear old horse," said Ukridge complainingly, "it's a little hard. You might look where you're going."

"You grappled with me!"

"You took me by surprise, laddie. Rid yourself of the impression that you're playing water-polo."

"But, professor," I said, joining the group and treading water, "one moment."

I was growing annoyed with the man. I could have ducked him, but for the reflection that my prospects of obtaining his consent to my engagement would scarcely have been enhanced thereby.

"But, professor," I said, "one moment."

"Go away, sir! I have nothing to say to you."

"But he has lots to say to you," said Ukridge. "Now's the time, old horse," he added encouragingly to me. "Spill the news!"

Without preamble I gave out the text of my address.

"I love your daughter, Phyllis, Mr. Derrick. She loves me. In fact, we are engaged."

"Devilish well put, laddie," said Ukridge approvingly.

The professor went under as if he had been seized with cramp. It was a little trying having to argue with a man, of whom one could not predict with certainty that at any given moment he would not be under water. It tended to spoil the flow of one's eloquence. The best of arguments is useless if the listener suddenly disappears in the middle of it.

"Stick to it, old horse," said Ukridge. "I think you're going to bring it off."

I stuck to it.

"Mr. Derrick," I said, as his head emerged, "you are naturally surprised."

"You would be," said Ukridge. "We don't blame you," he added handsomely.

"You—you—you—" So far from cooling the professor, liberal doses of water seemed to make him more heated. "You impudent scoundrel!"

My reply was more gentlemanly, more courteous, on a higher plane altogether.

I said, winningly: "Cannot we let bygones be bygones?"

From his remarks I gathered that we could not. I continued. I was under the unfortunate necessity of having to condense my speech. I was not able to let myself go as I could have wished, for time was an important consideration. Ere long, swallowing water at his present rate, the professor must inevitably become waterlogged.

"I have loved your daughter," I said rapidly, "ever since I first saw her . . . "

"And he's a capital chap," interjected Ukridge. "One of the best. Known him for years. You'll like him."

"I learned last night that she loved me. But she will not marry me without your consent. Stretch your arms out straight from the shoulders and fill your lungs well and you can't sink. So I have come this morning to ask for your consent."

"Give it!" advised Ukridge. "Couldn't do better. A very sound fellow. Pots of money, too. At least he will have when he marries."

"I know we have not been on the best of terms lately. For Heaven's sake don't try to talk, or you'll sink. The fault," I said, generously, "was mine . . . "

"Well put," said Ukridge.

"But when you have heard my explanation, I am sure you will forgive me. There, I told you so."

He reappeared some few feet to the left. I swam up, and resumed.

"When you left us so abruptly after our little dinner-party——"

"Come again some night," said Ukridge cordially. "Any time you're passing."

" . . . you put me in a very awkward position. I was desperately in love with your daughter, and as long as you were in the frame of mind in which you left I could not hope to find an opportunity of revealing my feelings to her."

"Revealing feelings is good," said Ukridge approvingly. "Neat."

"You see what a fix I was in, don't you? Keep your arms well out. I thought for hours and hours, to try and find some means of bringing about a reconciliation. You wouldn't believe how hard I thought."

"Got as thin as a corkscrew," said Ukridge.

"At last, seeing you fishing one morning when I was on the Cob, it struck me all of a sudden . . . "

"You know how it is," said Ukridge.

" . . . all of a sudden that the very best way would be to arrange a little boating accident. I was confident that I could rescue you all right."

Here I paused, and he seized the opportunity to curse me—briefly, with a wary eye on an incoming wavelet.

"If it hadn't been for the inscrutable workings of Providence, which has a mania for upsetting everything, all would have been well. In fact, all was well till you found out."

"Always the way," said Ukridge sadly. "Always the way."

"You young blackguard!"

He managed to slip past me, and made for the shore.

"Look at the thing from the standpoint of a philosopher, old horse," urged Ukridge, splashing after him. "The fact that the rescue was arranged oughtn't to matter. I mean to say, you didn't know it at the time, so, relatively, it was not, and you were genuinely saved from a watery grave and all that sort of thing."

I had not imagined Ukridge capable of such an excursion into metaphysics. I saw the truth of his line of argument so clearly that it seemed to me impossible for anyone else to get confused over it. I had certainly pulled the professor out of the water, and the fact that I had first caused him to be pushed in had nothing to do with the case. Either a man is a gallant rescuer or he is not a gallant rescuer. There is no middle course. I had saved his life—for he would certainly have drowned if left to himself—and I was entitled to his gratitude. That was all there was to be said about it.

These things both Ukridge and I tried to make plain as we swam along. But whether it was that the salt water he had swallowed had dulled the professor's normally keen intelligence or that our power of stating a case was too weak, the fact remains that he reached the beach an unconvinced man.

"Then may I consider," I said, "that your objections are removed? I have your consent?"

He stamped angrily, and his bare foot came down on a small, sharp pebble. With a brief exclamation he seized his foot in one hand and hopped up the beach. While hopping, he delivered his ultimatum. Probably the only instance on record of a father adopting this attitude in dismissing a suitor.

"You may not!" he cried. "You may consider no such thing. My objections were never more absolute. You detain me in the water, sir, till I am blue, sir, blue with cold, in order to listen to the most preposterous and impudent nonsense I ever heard."

This was unjust. If he had listened attentively from the first and avoided interruptions and had not behaved like a submarine we should have got through the business in half the time.

I said so.

"Don't talk to me, sir," he replied, hobbling off to his dressing-tent. "I will not listen to you. I will have nothing to do with you. I consider you impudent, sir."

"I assure you it was unintentional."

"Isch!" he said—being the first occasion and the last on which I have ever heard that remarkable monosyllable proceed from the mouth of man. And he vanished into his tent.

"Laddie," said Ukridge solemnly, "do you know what I think?"

"Well?"

"You haven't clicked, old horse!" said Ukridge.

20

Scientific Golf

PEOPLE are continually writing to the papers—or it may be one solitary enthusiast who writes under a number of pseudonyms —on the subject of sport, and the over-doing of the same by the modern young man. I recall one letter in which "Efficiency" gave it as his opinion that if the Young Man played less golf and did more drill, he would be all the better for it. I propose to report my doings with the professor on the links at some length, in order to refute this absurd view. Everybody ought to play golf, and nobody can begin it too soon. There ought not to be a single able-bodied infant in the British Isles who has not foozled a drive. To take my case. Suppose I had employed in drilling the hours I had spent in learning to handle my clubs. I might have drilled before the professor by the week without softening his heart. I might have ported arms and grounded arms and presented arms, and generally behaved in the manner advocated by "Efficiency", and what would have been the result? Indifference on his part, or—and if I overdid the thing—irritation. Whereas, by devoting a reasonable portion of my youth to learning the intricacies of golf I was enabled . . .

It happened in this way.

To me, as I stood with Ukridge in the fowl-run on the morning following my maritime conversation with the professor, regarding a hen that had posed before us, obviously with a view to inspection, there appeared a man carrying an envelope. Ukridge, who by this time saw, as Calverley almost said, "under every hat a dun," and imagined that no envelope could contain anything but a small account, softly and silently vanished away, leaving me to interview the enemy.

"Mr. Garnet, sir?" said the foe.

I recognised him. He was Professor Derrick's gardener.

I opened the envelope. No. Father's blessings were absent.

The letter was in the third person. Professor Derrick begged to inform Mr. Garnet that, by defeating Mr. Saul Potter, he had qualified for the final round of the Combe Regis Golf Tournament, in which, he understood, Mr. Garnet was to be his opponent. If it would be convenient for Mr. Garnet to play off the match on the present afternoon, Professor Derrick would be obliged if he would be at the Club House at half-past two. If this hour and day were unsuitable, would he kindly arrange others. The bearer would wait.

The bearer did wait. He waited for half-an-hour, as I found it impossible to shift him, not caring to use violence on a man well stricken in years, without first plying him with drink. He absorbed more of our diminishing cask of beer than we could conveniently spare, and then trudged off with a note, beautifully written in the third person, in which Mr. Garnet, after numerous compliments and thanks, begged to inform Professor Derrick that he would be at the Club House at the hour mentioned.

"And," I added—to myself, not in the note—"I will give him such a licking that he'll brain himself with a cleek."

For I was not pleased with the professor. I was conscious of a malicious joy at the prospect of snatching the prize from him. I knew he had set his heart on winning the tournament this year. To be runner-up two years in succession stimulates the desire for first place. It would be doubly bitter to him to be beaten by a newcomer, after the absence of his rival, the colonel, had awakened hope in him. And I knew I could do it. Even allowing for bad luck—and I am never a very unlucky golfer—I could rely almost with certainty on crushing the man.

"And I'll do it," I said to Bob, who had trotted up. I often make Bob the recipient of my confidences. He listens appreciatively, and never interrupts. And he never has grievances of his own. If there is one person I dislike, it is the man who tries to air his grievances when I wish to air mine.

"Bob," I said, running his tail through my fingers, "listen to me, my old University chum, for I have matured a dark scheme. Don't run away. You know you don't really want to go and look at that chicken. Listen to me. If I am in form this afternoon, and

I feel in my bones that I shall be, I shall nurse the professor. I shall play with him. Do you understand the principles of Match play at Golf, Robert? You score by holes, not strokes. There are eighteen holes. All right, how was *I* to know that you knew that without my telling you? Well, if you understand so much about the game, you will appreciate my dark scheme. I shall toy with the professor, Bob. I shall let him get ahead, and then catch him up. I shall go ahead myself, and let him catch me up. I shall race him neck and neck till the very end. Then, when his hair has turned white with the strain, and he's lost a couple of stone in weight, and his eyes are starting out of his head, and he's praying —if he ever does pray—to the Gods of Golf that he may be allowed to win, I shall go ahead and beat him by a hole. *I'll* teach him, Robert. He shall taste of my despair, and learn by proof in some wild hour how much the wretched dare. And when it's all over, and he's torn all his hair out and smashed all his clubs, I shall go and commit suicide off the Cob. Because, you see, if I can't marry Phyllis, I shan't have any use for life."

Bob wagged his tail cheerfully.

"I mean it," I said, rolling him on his back and punching him on the chest till his breathing became stertorous. "You don't see the sense of it, I know. But then you've got none of the finer feelings. You're a jolly good dog, Robert, but you're a rank materialist. Bones and cheese and potatoes with gravy over them make you happy. You don't know what it is to be in love. You'd better get right side up now, or you'll have apoplexy."

It has been my aim in the course of this narrative to extenuate nothing, nor set down aught in malice. Like the gentleman who played euchre with the Heathen Chinee, I state but facts. I do not, therefore, slur over my scheme for disturbing the professor's peace of mind. I am not always good and noble. I am the hero of this story, but I have my off moments.

I felt ruthless towards the professor. I cannot plead ignorance of the golfer's point of view as an excuse for my plottings. I knew that to one whose soul is in the game as the professor's was, the agony of being just beaten in an important match exceeds in bitterness all other agonies. I knew that, if I scraped through by

the smallest possible margin, his appetite would be destroyed, his sleep o' nights broken. He would wake from fitful slumber moaning that if he had only used his iron instead of his mashie at the tenth, all would have been well; that, if he had putted more carefully on the seventh green, life would not be drear and blank; that a more judicious manipulation of his brassy throughout might have given him something to live for. All these things I knew.

And they did not touch me. I was adamant. The professor was waiting for me at the Club House, and greeted me with a cold and stately inclination of the head.

"Beautiful day for golf," I observed in my gay, chatty manner. He bowed in silence.

"Very well," I thought. "Wait. Just wait."

"Miss Derrick is well, I hope?" I added aloud.

That drew him. He started. His aspect became doubly forbidding.

"Miss Derrick is perfectly well, sir, I thank you."

"And you? No bad effect, I hope, from your dip yesterday?"

"Mr. Garnet, I came here for golf, not conversation," he said.

We made it so. I drove off from the first tee. It was a splendid drive. I should not say so if there were anyone else to say so for me. Modesty would forbid. But, as there is no one, I must repeat the statement. It was one of the best drives of my experience. The ball flashed through the air, took the bunker with a dozen feet to spare, and rolled on to the green. I had felt all along that I should be in form. Unless my opponent was equally above himself, he was a lost man. I could toy with him.

The excellence of my drive had not been without its effect on the professor. I could see that he was not confident. He addressed his ball more strangely and at greater length than any one I had ever seen. He waggled his club over it as if he were going to perform a conjuring trick. Then he struck and topped it.

The ball rolled two yards.

He looked at it in silence. Then he looked at me—also in silence.

I was gazing seawards.

When I looked round he was getting to work with a brassy. This time he hit the bunker, and rolled back. He repeated this manœuvre twice.

"Hard luck!" I murmured sympathetically on the third occasion, thereby going as near to being slain with a niblick as it has ever been my lot to go. Your true golfer is easily roused in times of misfortune; and there was a red gleam in the eye of the professor turned to me.

"I shall pick my ball up," he growled.

We walked on in silence to the second tee. He did the second hole in four, which was good. I did it in three, which—unfortunately for him—was better.

I won the third hole.

I won the fourth hole.

I won the fifth hole.

I glanced at my opponent out of the corner of my eyes. The man was suffering. Beads of prespiration stood out on his forehead.

His play had become wilder and wilder at each hole in arithmetical progression. If he had been a plough he could hardly have turned up more soil. The imagination recoiled from the thought of what he would be doing in another half-hour if he deteriorated at his present speed.

A feeling of calm and content stole over me. I was not sorry for him. All the viciousness of my nature was uppermost in me. Once, when he missed the ball clean at the fifth tee, his eye met mine, and we stood staring at each other for a full half-minute without moving. I believe, if I had smiled then, he would have attacked me without hesitation. There is a type of golfer who really almost ceases to be human under stress of the wild agony of a series of foozles.

The sixth hole involves the player in a somewhat tricky piece of cross-country work, owing to the fact that there is a nasty ditch to be negotiated some fifty yards from the green. It is a beast of a ditch, which, if you are out of luck, just catches your second shot. "All hope abandon ye who enter here" might be written on a notice board over it.

The professor entered there. The unhappy man sent his second, as nice and clean a brassy shot as he had made all day, into its very jaws. And then madness seized him. A merciful local rule, framed by kindly men who have been in that ditch themselves, enacts that in such a case the player may take his ball and throw it over his shoulder, losing a stroke. But once, so the legend runs, a scratch man who found himself trapped, scorning to avail himself of this rule at the expense of its accompanying penalty, wrought so shrewdly with his niblick that he not only got out but actually laid his ball dead: and now optimists sometimes imitate his gallantry, though no one yet has been able to imitate his success.

The professor decided to take a chance: and he failed miserably. As I was on the green with my third, and, unless I putted extremely poorly, was morally certain to be down in five, which is bogey for the hole, there was not much practical use in his continuing to struggle. But he did in a spirit of pure vindictiveness, as if he were trying to take it out of the ball. It was a grisly sight to see him, head and shoulders above the ditch, hewing at his obstinate colonel. It was a similar spectacle that once induced a lay spectator of a golf match to observe that he considered hockey a silly game.

"*Sixteen!*" said the professor between his teeth. Then he picked up his ball.

I won the seventh hole.

I won the eighth hole.

The ninth we halved, for in the black depths of my soul I had formed a plan of fiendish subtlety. I intended to allow him to win—with extreme labour—eight holes in succession.

Then, when hope was once more strong in him, I would win the last, and he would go mad.

I watched him carefully as we trudged on. Emotions chased one another across his face. When he won the tenth hole he merely refrained from oaths. When he won the eleventh a sort of sullen pleasure showed in his face. It was at the thirteenth that I detected the first dawning of hope. From then onward it grew.

When, with a sequence of shocking shots, he took the seven-

teenth hole in seven, he was in a parlous condition. His run of success had engendered within him a desire for conversation. He wanted, as it were, to flap his wings and crow. I could see Dignity wrestling with Talkativeness. I gave him the lead.

"You have got back your form now," I said.

Talkativeness had it. Dignity retired hurt. Speech came from him with a rush. When he brought off an excellent drive from the eighteenth tee, he seemed to forget everything.

"Me dear boy,"—he began; and stopped abruptly in some confusion. Silence once more brooded over us as we played ourselves up the fairway and on to the green.

He was on the green in four. I reached it in three. His sixth stroke took him out.

I putted carefully to the very mouth of the hole.

I walked up to my ball, and paused. I looked at the professor. He looked at me.

"Go on," he said hoarsely.

Suddenly a wave of compassion flooded over me. What right had I to torture the man like this?

"Professor," I said.

"Go on," he repeated.

"That looks a simple shot," I said, eyeing him steadily, "but I might miss it."

He started.

"And then you would win the Championship."

He dabbed at his forehead with a wet ball of a handkerchief.

"It would be very pleasant for you after getting so near it the last two years."

"Go on," he said for the third time. But there was a note of hesitation in his voice.

"Sudden joy," I said, "would almost certainly make me miss it."

We looked at each other. He had the golf fever in his eyes.

"If," I said slowly, lifting my putter, "you were to give your consent to my marriage with Phyllis——"

He looked from me to the ball, from the ball to me, and back again to the ball. It was very, very near the hole.

"Why not?" I said.

He looked up, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"You young devil," said he, smiting his thigh, "you young devil, you've beaten me."

I swung my putter, and the ball trickled past the hole.

"On the contrary," I said, "you have beaten me."

I left the professor at the Club House and raced back to the farm. I wanted to pour my joys into a sympathetic ear. Ukridge, I knew, would offer that same sympathetic ear. A good fellow, Ukridge. Always interested in what you had to tell him; never bored.

"Ukridge!" I shouted.

No answer.

I flung open the dining-room door. Nobody.

I went into the drawing-room. It was empty. I drew the garden, and his bedroom. He was not in either.

"He must have gone for a stroll," I said.

I rang the bell.

The Hired Retainer appeared, calm and imperturbable as ever.

"Sir?"

"Oh, where is Mr. Ukridge, Beale?"

"Mr. Ukridge, sir," said the Hired Retainer nonchalantly, "has gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Ukridge and Mrs. Ukridge went away together by the three o'clock train."

21

The Calm Before the Storm

"BEALE," I said, "are you drunk?"

"Wish I was, sir," said the Hired Man.

"Then what on earth do you mean? Gone? Where have they gone to?"

"Don't know, sir. London, I expect."

"London? Why?"

"Don't know, sir."

"When did they go? Oh, you told me that. Didn't they say why they were going?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't you ask? When you saw them packing up and going to the station, didn't you do anything?"

"No, sir."

"Why on earth not?"

"I didn't see them, sir. I only found out as they'd gone after they'd been and went, sir. Walking down by the Net and Mackerel, met one of them coastguards. 'Oh,' says he, 'so you're moving?' 'Who's a-moving?' I says to him. 'Well,' he says to me, 'I seen your Mr. Ukridge and his missus get into the three o'clock train for Axminster. I thought as you was all a-moving.' 'Ho,' I says, 'Ho,' wondering, and I goes on. When I gets back, I asks the missus did she see them packing their boxes, and she says, No, she says, they didn't pack no boxes as she knowed of. And blowed if they had, Mr. Garnet, sir."

"What! They didn't pack!"

"No, sir."

We looked at one another.

"Beale," I said.

"Sir?"

"Do you know what I think?"

"Yes, sir."

"They've bolted."

"So I says to the missus, sir. It struck me right off, in a manner of speaking."

"This is awful," I said.

"Yes, sir."

His face betrayed no emotion, but he was one of those men whose expression never varies. It's a way they have in the Army.

"This wants thinking out, Beale," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"You'd better ask Mrs. Beale to give me some dinner, and then I'll think it over."

"Yes, sir."

I was in an unpleasant position. Ukridge by his defection had left me in charge of the farm. I could dissolve the concern, I supposed, if I wished, and return to London, but I particularly desired to remain in Combe Regis. To complete the victory I had won on the links, it was necessary for me to continue as I had begun. I was in the position of a general who has conquered a hostile country, and is obliged to soothe the feelings of the conquered people before his labours can be considered at an end. I had rushed the professor. It must now be my aim to keep him from regretting that he had been rushed. I must, therefore, stick to my post with the tenacity of an able-bodied leech. There would be trouble. Of that I was certain. As soon as the news got about that Ukridge had gone, the deluge would begin. His creditors would abandon their passive tactics, and take active steps. There was a chance that aggressive measures would be confined to the enemy at our gates, the tradesmen of Combe Regis. But the probability was that the news would spread, and the injured merchants of Dorchester and Axminster rush to the scene of hostilities.

I summoned Beale after dinner and held a council of war. It was no time for airy persiflage. I said, "Beale, we're in the cart."

"Sir?"

"Mr. Ukridge going away like this has left me in a most unpleasant position. I would like to talk it over with you. I daresay

you know that we—that Mr. Ukridge owes a considerable amount of money round about here to tradesmen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, when they find out that he has—er——"

"Shot the moon, sir," suggested the Hired Retainer helpfully.

"Gone up to town," I amended. "When they find out that he has gone up to town, they are likely to come bothering us a good deal."

"Yes, sir."

"I fancy that we shall have them all round here to-morrow. News of this sort always spreads quickly. The point is, then, what are we to do?"

He propounded no scheme, but stood in an easy attitude of attention, waiting for me to continue.

I continued.

"Let's see exactly how we stand," I said. "My point is that I particularly wish to go on living down here for at least another fortnight. Of course, my position is simple. I am Mr. Ukridge's guest. I shall go on living as I have been doing up to the present. He asked me down here to help him look after the fowls, so I shall go on looking after them. Complications set in when we come to consider you and Mrs. Beale. I suppose you won't care to stop on after this?"

The Hired Retainer scratched his chin and glanced out of the window. The moon was up, and the garden looked cool and mysterious in the dim light.

"It's a pretty place, Mr. Garnet, sir," he said.

"It is," I said, "but about other considerations? There's the matter of wages. Are yours in arrears?"

"Yes, sir. A month."

"And Mrs. Beale's the same, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. A month."

"H'm. Well, it seems to me, Beale, you can't lose anything by stopping on."

"I can't be paid any less than I have bin, sir," he agreed.

"Exactly. And, as you say, it's a pretty place. You might just as well stop on, and help me in the fowl-run. What do you think?"

"Very well, sir."

"And Mrs. Beale will do the same?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's excellent. You're a hero, Beale. I shan't forget you. There's a cheque coming to me from a magazine in another week for a short story. When it arrives, I'll look into that matter of back wages. Tell Mrs. Beale I'm much obliged to her, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Having concluded that delicate business, I lit my pipe, and strolled out into the garden with Bob. I cursed Ukridge as I walked. It was abominable of him to desert me in this way. Even if I had not been his friend, it would have been bad. The fact that we had known each other for years made it doubly discreditable. He might at least have warned me, and given me the option of leaving the sinking ship with him.

But, I reflected, I ought not to be surprised. His whole career, as long as I had known him, had been dotted with little eccentricities of a type which an unfeeling world generally stigmatises as shady. They were small things, it was true; but they ought to have warned me. We are most of us wise after the event. When the wind has blown, we can generally discover a multitude of straws which should have shown us which way it was blowing.

Once, I remembered, in our schoolmaster days, when guineas, though regular, were few, he had had occasion to increase his wardrobe. If I recollect rightly, he thought he had a chance of a good position in the tutoring line, and only needed good clothes to make it his. He took four pounds of his salary in advance—he was in the habit of doing this: he never had any of his salary left by the end of term, it having vanished in advance loans beforehand. With this he was to buy two suits, a hat, new boots, and collars. When it came to making the purchases, he found, what he had overlooked previously in his optimistic way, that four pounds did not go very far. At the time, I remember, I thought his method of grappling with the situation humorous. He bought a hat for three-and-sixpence, and got the suits and the boots on the instalment system, paying a small sum in advance, as earnest of more to come. He then pawned one suit to pay for

the first few instalments, and finally departed, to be known no more. His address he had given—with a false name—at an empty house, and when the tailor arrived with the minions of the law, all he found was an annoyed caretaker, and a pile of letters written by himself, containing his bill in its various stages of evolution.

Or again. There was a bicycle and photograph shop near the school. He went into this one day, and his roving eye fell on a tandem bicycle. He did not want a tandem bicycle, but that influenced him not at all. He ordered it provisionally. He also ordered an enlarging camera, a kodak, and a magic lantern. The order was booked, and the goods were to be delivered when he had made up his mind concerning them. After a week the shopman sent round to ask if there were any further particulars which Mr. Ukridge would like to learn before definitely ordering them. Mr. Ukridge sent back word that he was considering the matter, and that in the meantime would he be so good as to let him have that little clockwork man in his window, which walked when wound up? Having got this, and not paid for it, Ukridge thought that he had done handsomely by the bicycle and photograph man, and that things were square between them. The latter met him a few days afterwards, and expostulated plaintively. Ukridge explained. "My good man," he said, "you know, I really think we need say no more about the matter. Really, you've come out of it very well. Now, look here, which would you rather be owed for? A clockwork man—which is broken, and you can have it back—or a tandem bicycle, an enlarging camera, a kodak, and a magic-lantern? What?" His reasoning was too subtle for the uneducated mind. The man retired, puzzled, and unpaid, and Ukridge kept the clockwork toy.

22

The Storm Breaks

RATHER to my surprise, the next morning passed off uneventfully. Our knocker advertised no dun. Our lawn remained untrodden by hob-nailed boots. By lunch-time I had come to the conclusion that the expected Trouble would not occur that day, and I felt that I might well leave my post for the afternoon, while I went to the professor's to pay my respects. The professor was out when I arrived. Phyllis was in, and it was not till the evening that I started for the farm again.

As I approached, the sound of voices smote my ears.

I stopped. I could hear Beale speaking. Then came the rich notes of Vickers, the butcher. Then Beale again. Then Dawlish the grocer. Then a chorus.

The storm had burst, and in my absence.

I blushed for myself. I was in command, and I had deserted the fort in time of need. What must the faithful Hired Man be thinking of me? Probably he placed me, as he had placed Ukridge, in the ragged ranks of those who have Shot the Moon.

Fortunately, having just come from the professor's I was in the costume which of all my wardrobe was most calculated to impress. To a casual observer I should probably suggest wealth and respectability. I stopped for a moment to cool myself, for, as is my habit when pleased with life, I had been walking fast; then opened the gate and strode in, trying to look as opulent as possible.

It was an animated scene that met my eyes. In the middle of the lawn stood the devoted Beale, a little more flushed than I had seen him hitherto, parleying with a burly and excited young man without a coat. Grouped round the pair were some dozen men, young, middle-aged, and old, all talking their hardest. I could distinguish nothing of what they were saying. I noticed that Beale's left cheekbone was a little discoloured, and there was a

hard, dogged expression on his face. He, too, was in his shirt-sleeves.

My entry created no sensation. Nobody, apparently, had heard the latch click, and nobody had caught sight of me. Their eyes were fixed on the young man and Beale. I stood at the gate, and watched them.

There seemed to have been trouble already. Looking more closely, I perceived sitting on the grass apart a second young man. His face was obscured by a dirty pocket handkerchief, with which he dabbed tenderly at his features. Every now and then the shirt-sleeved young man flung his hand towards him with an indignant gesture, talking hard the while. It did not need a preternaturally keen observer to deduce what had happened. Beale must have fallen out with the young man who was sitting on the grass and smitten him; and now his friend had taken up the quarrel.

"Now this," I said to myself, "is rather interesting. Here, in this one farm, we have the only three known methods of dealing with duns. Beale is evidently an exponent of the violent method. Ukridge is an apostle of Evasion. I shall try Conciliation. I wonder which of us will be the most successful."

Meanwhile, not to spoil Beale's efforts by allowing him too little scope for experiment, I refrained from making my presence known, and continued to stand by the gate, an interested spectator.

Things were evidently moving now. The young man's gestures became more vigorous. The dogged look on Beale's face deepened. The comments of the Ring increased in point and pungency.

"What did you hit him for, then?"

The question was put, always in the same words and with the same air of quiet triumph, at intervals of thirty seconds by a little man in a snuff-coloured suit with a purple tie. Nobody ever answered him, or appeared to listen to him, but he seemed each time to think that he had clinched the matter and cornered his opponent.

Other voices chimed in.

"You hit him, Charlie. Go on. You hit him."

"We'll have the law."

"Go on, Charlie."

Flushed with the favour of the many-headed, Charlie now proceeded from threats to action. His right fist swung round suddenly. But Beale was on the alert. He ducked sharply, and the next moment Charlie was sitting on the ground beside his fallen friend. A hush fell on the Ring, and the little man in the purple tie was left repeating his formula without support.

I advanced. It seemed to me that the time had come to be conciliatory. Charlie was struggling to his feet, obviously anxious for a second round, and Beale was getting into position once more. In another five minutes conciliation would be out of the question.

"What's all this?" I said.

I may mention here that I do not propose to inflict dialect upon the reader. If he has borne with my narrative thus far, I look on him as a friend, and feel that he deserves consideration. I may not have brought out the fact with sufficient emphasis in the foregoing pages, but nevertheless I protest that I have a conscience. Not so much as a "thiccy" shall he find.

My advent caused a stir. Excited men left Beale, and rallied round me. Charlie, rising to his feet, found himself dethroned from his position of Man of the Moment, and stood blinking at the setting sun and opening and shutting his mouth. There was a buzz of conversation.

"Don't all speak at once, please," I said. "I can't possibly follow what you say. Perhaps you will tell me what you want?"

I singled out a short, stout man in grey. He wore the largest whiskers ever seen on human face.

"It's like this, sir. We all of us want to know where we are."

"I can tell you that," I said, "you're on our lawn, and I should be much obliged if you would stop digging your heels into it."

This was not, I suppose, Conciliation in the strictest and best sense of the word; but the thing had to be said. It is the duty of every good citizen to do his best to score off men with whiskers.

"You don't understand me, sir," he said excitedly. "When I

said we didn't know where we were, it was a manner of speaking. We want to know how we stand."

"On your heels," I replied gently, "as I pointed out before."

"I am Brass, sir, of Axminster. My account with Mr. Ukridge is ten pounds eight shillings and fourpence. I want to know——"

The whole strength of the company now joined in.

"You know me, Mr. Garnet. Appleby, in the High——" (Voice lost in the general roar.)

" . . . and eightpence."

"My account with Mr. Uk . . . "

" . . . settle . . . "

"I represent Bodger . . . "

A diversion occurred at this point. Charlie, who had long been eyeing Beale sourly, dashed at him with swinging fists, and was knocked down again. The whole trend of the meeting altered once more. Conciliation became a drug. Violence was what the public wanted. Beale had three fights in rapid succession. I was helpless. Instinct prompted me to join the fray; but prudence told me that such a course would be fatal.

At last, in a lull, I managed to catch the Hired Retainer by the arm, as he drew back from the prostrate form of his latest victim. "Drop it, Beale," I whispered hotly, "drop it. We shall never manage these people if you knock them about. Go indoors, and stay there while I talk to them."

"Mr. Garnet, sir," said he, the light of battle dying out of his eyes, "it's 'ard. It's cruel 'ard. I ain't 'ad a turn-up, not to *call* a turn-up, since I've been a time-expired man. I ain't hitting of 'em, Mr. Garnet, sir, not hard I ain't. That there first one of 'em he played me dirty, hittin' at me when I wasn't looking. They can't say as I started it."

"That's all right, Beale," I said soothingly. "I know it wasn't your fault, and I know it's hard on you to have to stop, but I wish you would go indoors. I must talk to these men, and we shan't have a moment's peace while you're here. Cut along."

"Very well, sir. But it's 'ard. Mayn't I 'ave just one go at that Charlie, Mr. Garnet?" he asked wistfully.

"No, no. Go in."

"And if they goes for you, sir, and tries to wipe the face off you?"

"They won't, they won't. If they do, I'll shout for you."

He went reluctantly into the house, and I turned again to my audience.

"If you will kindly be quiet for a moment——" I said.

"I am Appleby, Mr. Garnet, in the High Street. Mr. Ukridge——"

"Eighteen pounds fourteen shilling——"

"Kindly glance——"

I waved my hands wildly above my head.

"Stop! stop! stop!" I shouted.

The babble continued, but diminished gradually in volume. Through the trees, as I waited, I caught a glimpse of the sea. I wished I was out on the Cob, where beyond these voices there was peace. My head was beginning to ache, and I felt faint for want of food.

"Gentlemen," I cried, as the noise died away.

The latch of the gate clicked. I looked up, and saw a tall thin young man in a frock-coat and silk hat enter the garden. It was the first time I had seen the costume in the country.

He approached me.

"Mr. Ukridge, sir?" he said.

"My name is Garnet. Mr. Ukridge is away at the moment."

"I come from Whiteley's, Mr. Garnet. Our Mr. Blenkinsop having written on several occasions to Mr. Ukridge calling his attention to the fact that his account has been allowed to mount to a considerable figure, and having received no satisfactory reply, desired me to visit him. I am sorry that he is not at home."

"So am I," I said with feeling.

"Do you expect him to return shortly?"

"No," I said, "I do not."

He was looking curiously at the expectant band of duns. I forestalled his question.

"Those are some of Mr. Ukridge's creditors," I said. "I am just about to address them. Perhaps you will take a seat. The grass is quite dry. My remarks will embrace you as well as them."

Comprehension came into his eyes, and the natural man in him peeped through the polish.

"Great Scott, has he done a bunk?" he cried.

"To the best of my knowledge, yes," I said.

He whistled.

I turned again to the local talent.

"Gentlemen," I shouted.

"Hear, hear," said some idiot.

"Gentlemen, I intend to be quite frank with you. We must decide just how matters stand between us. (A voice: Where's Ukridge?) Mr. Ukridge left for London suddenly (bitter laughter) yesterday afternoon. Personally I think he will come back very shortly."

Hoots of derision greeted this prophecy. I resumed.

"I fail to see your object in coming here. I have nothing for you. I couldn't pay your bills if I wanted to."

It began to be borne upon me that I was becoming unpopular.

"I am here simply as Mr. Ukridge's guest," I proceeded. After all, why should I spare the man? "I have nothing whatever to do with his business affairs. I refuse absolutely to be regarded as in any way indebted to you. I am sorry for you. You have my sympathy. That is all I can give you, sympathy—and good advice."

Dissatisfaction. I was getting myself disliked. And I had meant to be so conciliatory, to speak to these unfortunates words of cheer which should be as olive oil poured into a wound. For I really did sympathise with them. I considered that Ukridge had used them disgracefully. But I was irritated. My head ached abominably.

"Then am I to tell our Mr. Blenkinsop," asked the frock-coated one, "that the money is not and will not be forthcoming?"

"When next you smoke a quiet cigar with your Mr. Blenkinsop," I replied courteously, "and find conversation flagging, I rather think I *should* say something of the sort."

"We shall, of course, instruct our solicitors at once to institute legal proceedings against your Mr. Ukridge."

"Don't call him my Mr. Ukridge. You can do whatever you please."

"That is your last word on the subject?"

"I hope so. But I fear not."

"Where's our money?" demanded a discontented voice from the crowd.

An idea struck me.

"Beale!" I shouted.

Out came the Hired Retainer at the double. I fancy he thought that his help was needed to save me from my friends.

He slowed down, seeing me as yet unassaulted.

"Sir?" he said.

"Isn't there a case of that whisky left somewhere, Beale?"

I had struck the right note. There was a hush of pleased anticipation among the audience.

"Yes, sir. One."

"Then bring it out here and open it."

Beale looked pained.

"For *them*, sir!" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Hurry up."

He hesitated, then without a word went into the house. A hearty cheer went up as he reappeared with the case. I proceeded indoors in search of glasses and water.

Coming out, I realised my folly in having left Beale alone with our visitors even for a minute. A brisk battle was raging between him and a man whom I did not remember to have seen before. The frock-coated young man was looking on with pale fear stamped upon his face; but the rest of the crowd were shouting advice and encouragement: and to my surprise all the encouragement was being given to Beale. How, I wondered, had he pacified the mob?

I soon discovered. As I ran up as quickly as I could, hampered as I was by the jugs and glasses, Beale knocked his man out with the clean precision of the experienced boxer; and the crowd explained in chorus that it was the pot-boy from the Net and Mackerel. Like everything else, the whisky had not been paid for, and the pot-boy, arriving just as the case was being opened, had made a gallant effort to save it from being distributed free to his fellow-citizens. By the time he came to, the glasses were

circulating merrily; and, on observing this, he accepted the situation philosophically enough, and took his turn and turn about with the others.

Everybody was now in excellent fettle. The only malcontents were Beale, whose heart plainly bled at the waste of good Scotch whisky, and the frock-coated young man, who was still pallid.

I was just congratulating myself, as I eyed the revellers, on having achieved a master-stroke of strategy, when that demon Charlie, his defeat, I suppose, still rankling, made a suggestion. From his point of view a timely and ingenious suggestion.

Filled with whisky and viciousness, he proposed that the company should sack the place.

"We can't see the colour of our money," he said pithily, "but we can have our own back."

That settled it. The battle was over. The most skilful general must sometimes recognise defeat. I recognised it then, and threw up my hand. I could do nothing further with them. I had done my best for the farm. I could do no more.

I lit my pipe, and strolled into the paddock.

Chaos followed. Indoors and out-of-doors they raged without check. Even Beale gave the thing up. He knocked Charlie into a flower-bed, and then disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

It was growing dusk. From inside the house came faint sounds of bibulous mirth, as the sacking party emptied the rooms of their contents. In the fowl-run a hen was crooning sleepily in its coop. It was a very soft, liquid, soothing sound.

Presently out came the invaders with their loot, one with a picture, another with a vase, another bearing the gramophone upside down. They were singing in many keys and times.

Then I heard somebody—Charlie again, it seemed to me—propose a raid on the fowl-run.

The fowls had had their moments of unrest since they had been our property, but what they had gone through with us was peace compared with what befell them then. Not even on the second evening of our visit, when we had run unmeasured miles in pursuit of them, had there been such confusion. Roused abruptly from their beauty-sleep they fled in all directions. Their pursuers,

roaring with laughter, staggered after them. They tumbled over one another. The summer evening was made hideous with the noise of them.

"Disgraceful, sir. Is it not disgraceful!" said a voice in my ear.

The young man from Whiteley's stood beside me. He did not look happy. His forehead was damp. Somebody seemed to have stepped on his hat, and his coat was smeared with mould.

I was turning to answer him when from the dusk in the direction of the house came a sudden roar. A passionate appeal to the world in general to tell the speaker what all this meant.

There was only one man of my acquaintance with a voice like that.

I walked without hurry towards him.

"Good evening, Ukridge," I said.

23

After the Storm

A YELL of welcome drowned the tumult of the looters. "Is that you, Garny, old horse? What's up? What's the matter? Has everyone gone mad? Who are those infernal scoundrels in the fowl-run? What are they doing? What's been happening?"

"I have been entertaining a little meeting of your creditors," I said. "And now they are entertaining themselves."

"But what did you let them do it for?"

"What is one amongst so many?"

"Well, 'pon my Sam," moaned Ukridge, as, her sardonic calm laid aside, that sinister hen which we called Aunt Elizabeth flashed past us pursued by the whiskered criminal, "it's a little hard! I can't go away for a day——"

"You certainly can't! You're right there. You can't go away without a word——"

"Without a word? What do you mean? Garny, old boy, pull yourself together. You're over-excited. Do you mean to tell me you didn't get my note?"

"What note?"

"The one I left on the dining-room table."

"There was no note there."

"What!"

I was reminded of the scene that had taken place on the first day of our visit.

"Feel in your pockets," I said.

"Why, damme, here it is!" he said in amazement.

"Of course. Where did you expect it would be? Was it important?"

"Why, it explained the whole thing.

"Then," I said, "I wish you would let me read it. A note like that ought to be worth reading."

"It was telling you to sit tight and not worry about us going away——"

"That's good about worrying. You're a thoughtful chap, Ukridge."

"——because we should be back immediately."

"And what sent you up to town?"

"Why, we went to touch Millie's Aunt Elizabeth."

"Oh!" I said, a light shining on the darkness of my understanding.

"You remember Aunt Elizabeth? The old girl who wrote that letter."

"I know. She called you a gaby."

"And a guffin."

"Yes. I remember thinking her a shrewd and discriminating old lady, with a great gift for character delineation. So you went to touch her?"

"That's it. We had to have more money. So I naturally thought of her. Aunt Elizabeth isn't what you might call an admirer of mine——"

"Bless her for that."

"——but she's very fond of Millie, and would do anything if she's allowed to chuck about a few home-truths before doing it. So we went off together, looked her up at her house, stated our case, and collected the stuff. Millie and I shared the work. She did the asking, while I inquired after the rheumatism. She mentioned the figure that would clear us; I patted the dog. Little beast! Got after me when I wasn't looking and chewed my ankle!"

"Thank Heaven!"

"In the end Millie got the money, and I got the home-truths."

"Did she call you a gaby?"

"Twice. And a guffin three times."

"Your Aunt Elizabeth is beginning to fascinate me. She seems just the sort of woman I would like. Well, you got the money?"

"Rather! And I'll tell you another thing, old horse. I scored heavily at the end of the visit. She'd got to the quoting-proverbs stage by that time. 'Ah, my dear,' she said to Millie. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure.' Millie stood up to her like a little brick.

'I'm afraid that proverb doesn't apply to me, Aunt Elizabeth,' she said, 'because I haven't repented!' What do you think of that, Laddie?"

"Of course, she *hasn't* had much leisure lately," I agreed.

Ukridge's jaw dropped slightly. But he rallied swiftly.

"Idiot! That wasn't what she meant. Millie's an angel!"

"Of course she is," I said cordially. "She's a precious sight too good for you, you old rotter. You bear that fact steadily in mind, and we'll make something of you yet."

At this point Mrs. Ukridge joined us. She had been exploring the house, and noting the damage done. Her eyes were open to their fullest extent.

"Oh, Mr. Garnet, *couldn't* you have stopped them?"

I felt a worm. Had I done as much as I might have done to stem the tide?

"I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Ukridge," I said humbly. "I really don't think I could have done much more. We tried every method. Beale had seven fights, and I made a speech on the lawn, but it was all no good. Directly they had finished the whisky——"

Ukridge's cry was like that of a lost spirit.

"They didn't get hold of the whisky!"

"They did! It seemed to me that it would smooth things down a little if I served it out. The mob had begun to get a trifle out of hand."

"I thought those horrid men were making a lot of noise," said Mrs. Ukridge.

Ukridge preserved a gloomy silence. Of all the disasters of that stricken field, I think the one that came home most poignantly to him was the loss of the whisky. It seemed to strike him like a blow.

"Isn't it about time to collect these men and explain things?" I suggested. "I don't believe any of them know you've come back."

"They will!" said Ukridge grimly, coming out of his trance. "They soon will! Where's Beale! Beale!"

The Hired Retainer came running out at the sound of the well-remembered voice.

"Lumme, Mr. Ukridge, sir!" he gasped.

It was the first time Beale had ever betrayed any real emotion in my presence. To him, I suppose, the return of Ukridge was as sensational and astonishing an event as a reappearance from the tomb. He was not accustomed to find those who had shot the moon revisiting their ancient haunts.

"Beale, go round the place and tell those scoundrels that I've come back, and would like a word with them on the lawn. And, if you find any of them stealing the fowls, knock them down!"

"I 'ave knocked down one or two," said Beale, with approval. "That Charlie——"

"Beale," said Ukridge, much moved, "you're an excellent fellow! One of the very best. I will pay you your back wages before I go to bed."

"Those fellars, sir," said Beale, having expressed his gratification, "they've bin and scattered most of them birds already, sir. They've bin chasin' of them this half-hour back."

Ukridge groaned.

"Scoundrels! Demons!"

Beale went off.

"Millie, old girl," said Ukridge, adjusting the ginger-beer wire behind his ears and hoisting up his grey flannel-trousers, which showed an inclination to sag, "you'd better go indoors. I propose to speak pretty chattily to these blighters, and in the heat of the moment one or two expressions might occur to me which you would not like. It would hamper me, your being here."

Mrs. Ukridge went into the house, and the vanguard of the audience began to come on to the lawn. Several of them looked flushed and dishevelled. I have a suspicion that Beale had shaken sobriety into them. Charlie, I noticed, had a black eye.

They assembled on the lawn in the moonlight, and Ukridge, with his cap well over his eyes and his mackintosh hanging round him like a Roman toga, surveyed them sternly, and began his speech.

"You—you—you—you scoundrels! You blighters! You worms! You weeds!"

I always like to think of Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge as I saw him at that moment. There have been times during a

friendship of many years when his conduct did not recommend itself to me. It has sometimes happened that I have seen flaws in him. But on this occasion he was at his best. He was eloquent. He dominated his audience. Long before he had finished I was feeling relieved that he had thought of sending Mrs. Ukridge indoors when he did, and Beale was hanging on his words with a look in his eyes which I had never seen there before—a look of reverence, almost of awe, the look of a disciple who listens to a master.

He poured scorn upon his hearers, and they quailed. He flung invective at them, and they wilted. Strange oaths, learned among strange men on cattle-ships or gleaned on the waterfronts of Buenos Ayres and San Francisco, slid into the stream of his speech. It was hard, he said in part, it was, upon his Sam, a little hard that a gentleman—a gentleman, moreover, who had done so much to stimulate local trade with large orders and what not—could not run up to London for five minutes on business without having his private grounds turned upside down by a gang of cattle-ship adjectived San Francisco substantives who behaved as if the whole of the Buenos Ayres phrased place belonged to them. He had intended to do well by them. He had meant to continue putting business in their way, expanding their trade. But would he after what had occurred? Not by a jugful! As soon as ever the sun had risen and another day begun, their miserable accounts should be paid in full, and their connection with him cut off. Afterwards it was probable that he would institute legal proceedings against them in the matter of trespass and wholesale damage to property, and if they didn't all end their infernal days in some dashed prison they might consider themselves uncommonly lucky, and if they didn't make themselves scarce in considerably under two ticks, he proposed to see what could be done with Beale's shot-gun. (Beale here withdrew with a pleased expression to fetch the weapon.) He was sick of them. They were blighters. Creatures that it would be fulsome flattery to describe as human beings. He would call them skunks, only he did not see what the skunks had done to be compared with them. And now they might go—*quick!*

Beale at this point came out with the shotgun, and the meeting dispersed without the usual vote of thanks.

We were quiet at the farm that night. Ukridge sat like Marius among the ruins of Carthage, and refused to speak. Eventually he took Bob with him and went for a walk.

Half an hour later I, too, wearied of the scene of desolation. My errant steps took me in the direction of the sea. As I approached, I was aware of a figure standing in the moonlight, gazing silently out over the waters. Beside the figure was a dog.

The dark moments of optimistic minds are sacred, and I would no more have ventured to break in on Ukridge's thoughts at that moment than, if I had been a general in the Grand Army, I would have opened conversation with Napoleon during the retreat from Moscow. I was withdrawing as softly as I could, when my foot grated on the shingle. Ukridge turned.

"Hullo, Garny."

"Hullo, old man." I murmured in a death-bedside voice.

He came towards me, Bob trotting at his heels: and, as he came, I saw with astonishment that his mien was calm, even cheerful. I should have known my Ukridge better than to be astonished. You cannot keep a good man down, and already Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge was himself again. His eyes sparkled buoyantly behind their pince-nez.

"Garny, old horse, I've been thinking, laddie! I've got an idea! The idea of a lifetime. The best ever, 'pon my Sam! I'm going to start a duck farm!"

"A duck farm?"

"A duck farm, laddie! And run it without water. My theory is, you see, that ducks get thin by taking exercise and swimming about all over the place, so that, if you kept them always on land, they'd get jolly fat in about half the time—and no trouble and expense. See? What? Not a flaw in it, old horse! I've thought the whole thing out." He took my arm affectionately. "Now, listen. We'll say that the profits of the first year at a conservative estimate . . . "

Eggs, Beans and Crumpets

1

All's Well with Bingo

A BEAN and a Crumpet were in the smoking-room of the Drones Club having a quick one before lunch, when an Egg who had been seated at the writing-table in the corner rose and approached them.

"How many 'r's' in 'intolerable'?" he asked.

"Two," said the Crumpet. "Why?"

"I am writing a strong letter to the Committee," explained the Egg, "drawing their attention to the intolerable . . . Great Scot!" he cried, breaking off. "There he goes again!"

A spasm contorted his face. Outside in the passage a fresh young voice had burst into a gay song with a good deal of vo-de-o-de-o about it. The Bean cocked an attentive ear as it died away in the direction of the dining-room.

"Who is this linnet?" he inquired.

"Bingo Little, blast him. He's always singing nowadays. That's what I'm writing my strong letter to the Committee about —the intolerable nuisance of this incessant heartiness of his. Because it isn't only his singing. He slaps backs. Only yesterday he came sneaking up behind me in the bar and sloshed me between the shoulder-blades, saying 'Aha!' as he did so. Might have choked me. How many 's's' in 'incessant'?"

"Three," said the Crumpet.

"Thanks," said the Egg.

He returned to the writing-table. The Bean seemed perplexed.

"Odd," he said. "Very odd. How do you account for young Bingo carrying on like this?"

"Just *joie de vivre*."

"But he's married. Didn't he marry some female novelist or other?"

"That's right. Rosie M. Banks, authoress of *Only A Factory Girl*, *Merveyne Keene*, *Clubman*, *'Twas Once In May*, and other works. You see her name everywhere. I understand she makes a packet with the pen."

"I didn't know married men had any *joie de vivre*."

"Not many, of course. But Bingo's union has been an exceptionally happy one. He and the other half of the sketch have hit it off from the start like a couple of love-birds."

"Well, he oughtn't to slap backs about it."

"You don't know the inside facts. Bingo is no mere wanton back-slapper. What has made him that way at the moment is the fact that he recently had a most merciful escape. There was within a toucher of being very serious trouble in the home."

"But you said they were like a couple of love-birds."

"Quite. But even with love-birds circumstances can arise which will cause the female love-bird to get above herself and start throwing her weight about. If Mrs. Bingo had got on Bingo what at one time it appeared inevitable that she must get on him, it would have kept her in conversation for the remainder of their married lives. She is a sweet little thing, one of the best, but women are women and I think that there can be no doubt that she would have continued to make passing allusions to the affair right up to the golden wedding day. The way Bingo looks at it is that he has escaped the fate that is worse than death, and I am inclined to agree with him."

The thing started one morning when Bingo returned to the love-nest for a bite of lunch after taking the Pekinese for a saunter. He was in the hall trying to balance an umbrella on the tip of his nose, his habit when at leisure, and Mrs. Bingo came out of her study with a wrinkled brow and a couple of spots of ink on her chin.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "Bingo, have you ever been to Monte Carlo?"

Bingo could not help wincing a little at this. Unwittingly, the woman had touched an exposed nerve. The thing he had always wanted to do most in the world was to go to Monte Carlo, for he had a system which couldn't fail to clean out the Casino; but few places, as you are probably aware, are more difficult for a married man to sneak off to.

"No," he said with a touch of moodiness. Then, recovering his usual sunny aplomb: "Look," he said. "Watch, old partner in sickness and in health. I place the umbrella so. Then, maintaining a perfect equilibrium . . ."

"I want you to go there at once," said Mrs. Bingo.

Bingo dropped the umbrella. You could have knocked him

down with a toothpick. For a moment, he tells me, he thought that he must be dreaming some beautiful dream.

"It's for my book. I can't get on without some local colour."

Bingo grasped the gist. Mrs. Bingo had often discussed this business of local colour with him. Nowadays he knew, if you are providing wholesome fiction for the masses, you have simply got to get your atmosphere right. The customers have become cagey. They know too much. Chance your arm with the *mise en scène*, and before you can say "What ho," you've made some bloomer and people are writing you nasty letters, beginning "Dear Madam, Are you aware——?"

"And I can't go myself. There's the Pen and Ink dinner on Friday, and on Tuesday the Writers' Club is giving a luncheon to Mrs. Carrie Melrose Bopp, the American novelist. And any moment now I shall be coming to the part where Lord Peter Shipbourne breaks the bank. So do you think you could possibly go, Bingo darling?"

Bingo was beginning to understand how the Israelites must have felt when that manna started descending in the wilderness.

"Of course I'll go, old egg," he said heartily. "Anything I can——"

His voice trailed away. A sudden thought had come, biting into his soul like acid. He had remembered that he hadn't a bean to his name. He had lost every penny he possessed two weeks before on a horse called Bounding Beauty which was running—if you could call it running—in the two-thirty at Haydock Park.

The trouble with old Bingo is that he will allow his cooler judgment to be warped by dreams and omens. Nobody had known better than he that by the ruling of the form-book Bounding Beauty hadn't a chance: but on the eve of the race he had a nightmare in which he saw his Uncle Wilberforce dancing the rumba in the nude on the steps of the National Liberal Club and, like a silly ass, accepted this as a bit of stable information. And bang, as I say, had gone every penny he had in the world.

For a moment he reeled a bit. Then he brightened. Rosie, he reasoned, would scarcely expect him to undertake an irksome job like sweating all the way over to Monte Carlo without financing the tedious expedition.

"Of course, of course, of course," he said. "Yes, rather! I'll

start to-morrow. And about expenses. I suppose a hundred quid would see me through, though two would be still better, and even three wouldn't hurt. . . ."

"Oh, no, that's all right," said Mrs. Bingo. "You won't need any money."

Bingo gulped like an ostrich swallowing a brass door-knob.

"Not . . . need . . . any . . . money?

"Except a pound or two for tips and so on. Everything is arranged. Dora Spurgeon is at Cannes, and I'm going to 'phone her to get you a room at the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo, and all the bills will be sent to my bank."

Bingo had to gulp a couple more times before he was able to continue holding up his end of the duologue.

"But I take it," he said in a low voice, "that you want me to hobnob with the international spies and veiled women and so forth and observe their habits carefully, don't you? This will run into money. You know what international spies are. It's champagne for them every time, and no half-bots, either."

"You needn't bother about the spies. I can imagine them. All I want is the local colour. An exact description of the Rooms and the Square and all that. Besides, if you had a lot of money, you might be tempted to gamble."

"What!" cried Bingo. "Gamble? Me?"

"No, no," said Mrs. Bingo remorsefully. "I'm wronging you, of course. Still, I think I'd sooner we did it in the way I've arranged."

So there you have the position of affairs, and you will not be surprised to learn that poor old Bingo made an indifferent lunch, toying with the minced chicken and pushing the roly-poly pudding away untasted. His manner during the meal was distrait, for his brain was racing like a dynamo. Somehow he had got to get the stuff. But how? How?

Bingo, you see, is not a man who finds it easy to float a really substantial loan. People know too much about his financial outlook. He will have it in sackfuls some day, of course, but until he realizes on his Uncle Wilberforce—who is eighty-six and may quite easily go to par—the wolf, so far as he is concerned, will always be in or about the vestibule. The public is aware of this, and it makes the market sluggish.

It seemed to him, brooding over the thing, that his only prospect for the sort of sum he required was Oofy Prosser. Oofy, while

not an easy parter, is a millionaire, and a millionaire was what he required. So round about cocktail time he buzzed off to the club, only to be informed that Oofy was abroad. The disappointment was so severe that he was compelled to go to the smoking-room and have a restorative. I was there when he came in, and so haggard and fishlike was his demeanour that I asked him what was up, and he told me all.

"You couldn't lend me between twenty and twenty-five, or, better still, thirty quid, could you?" he said.

I said "No, I couldn't," and he heaved a long, low, quivering sigh.

"And so it goes on," he said. "That's Life. Here I am with this unique opportunity of making a stupendous fortune, and crippled for lack of essential capital. Did you ever hear of a chap called Garcia?"

"No."

"Skinned the Monte Carlo Administration of a hundred thousand quid in his day. Ever hear of a chap called Darnborough?"

"No."

"Eighty-three thousand of the best was what he pocketed. Did you ever hear of a chap called Owers?"

"No."

"His winning streak lasted for more than twenty years. These three birds of whom I speak simply went to Monte Carlo and lolled back in their chairs with fat cigars, and the Casino just thrust the money on them. And I don't suppose any of them had a system like mine. Oh, hell, a thousand curses," said Bingo.

Well, there isn't much you can say when a fellow's in the depths like that. The only thing I could suggest was that he should put some little trinket up the spout temporarily. His cigarette-case, for instance, I said; and it was then that I learned that that cigarette-case of his is not the solid gold we have always imagined. Tin, really. And except for the cigarette-case, it appeared, the only trinket he had ever possessed was a diamond brooch which, being in funds at the time as the result of a fortunate speculation at Catterick Bridge, he had bought Mrs. Bingo for a birthday present.

It all seemed pretty hopeless, accordingly, so I merely offered him my heartfelt sympathy and another snootful. And next morning he steamed off on the eleven o'clock express, despair in

his soul and in his pocket a notebook, four pencils, his return ticket, and about three pounds for tips and so on. And shortly before lunch on the following day he was alighting at Monte Carlo station.

I don't know if you remember a song some years ago that went "Ti-um-ti-um-ti-um-ti-um, Ti-um-ti-um-ti-ay," and then, after a bit more of that, finished up:

Ti-um-ti-um-ti-um-ti-UM,
The curse of an aching heart.

You don't hear it much nowadays, but at one time you were extraordinarily apt to get it shot at you by bassos at smoking concerts and entertainments in aid of the Church Organ Fund in the old village hall. They would pause for a moment after the "UM" and take a breath that came up from their ankle bones, and then:

It's the curse of an A-ching heart.

Most unpleasant, of course, the whole thing, and I wouldn't have mentioned it, only the phrase absolutely puts in a nutshell the way poor old Bingo felt during his first two days at Monte Carlo. He had an aching heart, and he cursed like billy-o. And I'm not surprised, poor chap, for he was suffering severe torments.

All day long, though it was like twisting the knife in the wound, he would wander through the Rooms, trying out that system of his on paper; and the more he tried it out, the more iron-clad it revealed itself. Simply couldn't lose.

By bedtime on the second night he found that, if he had been playing in hundred-franc chips, he would have been no less than two hundred and fifty pounds ahead—just like that. In short, there was all that stuff—his for the picking up, as you might say—and he couldn't get it.

Garcia would have got it. Darnborough would have got it. So would Owers. But he couldn't. Simply, mark you, for lack of a trifling spot of initial capital which a fellow like Oofy Prosser could have slipped him and never felt it. Pretty bitter.

And then, on the third morning, as he sat glancing through the newspaper over the breakfast-table, he saw a news item which brought him up in his chair with a jerk, choking over his coffee.

Among the recent arrivals at the Hôtel Magnifique at Nice, it

said, were Their Serene Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Graustark, His Majesty the ex-King of Ruritania, Lord Percy Poffin, the Countess of Goffin, Major-General Sir Everard Slurk, K.V.O., and Mr. Prosser.

Well, of course, it might be some other brand of Prosser, but Bingo didn't think so. An hotel where Serene Highnesses were to be found was just the place for which a bally snob like Oofy would have made a bee-line. He rushed to the telephone and was presently in communication with the concierge.

"Hullo? Yes?" said the concierge. "This is the Hôtel Magnifique. Hall porter speaking."

"*Dites-moi*," said Bingo. "*Esker-vous avez dans votre hôtel un monsieur nommé* Prosser?"

"Yes, sir. Quite correct. There is a Mr. Prosser staying in the hotel."

"*Est-il un oiseau avec beaucoup de* . . . . Oh, hell, what's the French for 'pimples'?"

"The word you are trying to find is *bouton*," said the concierge. "Yes, sir, Mr. Prosser is liberally pimpled."

"Then put me through to his room," said Bingo. And pretty soon he heard a sleepy and familiar voice hullo-ing.

"Hullo, Oofy, old man," he cried. "This is Bingo Little."

"Oh, my God!" said Oofy, and something in his manner warned Bingo that it would be well to proceed with snakiness and caution.

There were, he knew, two things which rendered Oofy Prosser a difficult proposition for the ear-biter. In the first place, owing to his habit of mopping it up at late parties, he nearly always had a dyspeptic headache. In the second place, his position as the official moneyed man of the Drones Club had caused him to become shy and wary, like a bird that's been a good deal shot over. You can't touch a chap like that on the telephone at ten in the morning. It would, he perceived, if solid results were to be obtained, be necessary to sweeten Oofy.

"I just this minute saw in the paper that you were in these parts, Oofy, old man. A wonderful surprise it was. 'Gosh,' I said. 'Golly,' I said. 'Dear old Oofy,' I said. 'Well, well, well!' "

"Get on with it," said Oofy. "What do you want?"

"Why, to give you lunch, of course, old chap," said Bingo.

Yes, he had made the great decision. That money which he had been earmarking for tips must be diverted to another end. It

might lead to his having to sneak out of the hotel at the conclusion of his visit with his face scarlet and his ears hanging down, but the risk had to be taken. Nothing venture, nothing have.

At the other end of the telephone he heard a sort of choking gasp.

"There must be something wrong with this wire," said Oofy. "It sounds just as if you were saying you want to give me lunch."

"So I am."

"*Give* me lunch?"

"That's right."

"What, pay the bill?"

"Yes."

There was a silence.

"I must send this to Ripley," said Oofy.

"Ripley?"

"The Believe-it-or-not man."

"Oh!" said Bingo. He was not quite sure that he liked Oofy's attitude, but he remained sunny. "Well, where and when? What time? What place?"

"We may as well lunch here. Come fairly early, because I'm going to the races this afternoon."

"Right," said Bingo. "I'll be on the mat at one sharp."

And at one sharp there he was, his little all in his pocket. His emotions, he tells me, as he drove in on the Monte Carlo–Nice 'bus, were mixed. One moment, he was hoping that Oofy would have his usual dyspeptic headache, because that would blunt his, Oofy's, appetite and enable him, Bingo, to save something out of the wreck: the next, he was reminding himself that an Oofy with dull, shooting pains about the temples would be less likely to come across. It was all very complex.

Well, as it turned out, Oofy's appetite was the reverse of blunted. The extraordinary position in which he found himself—guest and not host to a fellow-member of the Drones—seemed to have put an edge on it. It is not too much to say that from the very outset he ate like a starving python. The light, casual way in which he spoke to the head waiter about hot-house grapes and asparagus froze Bingo to the marrow. And when—from force of habit, no doubt—he called for the wine list and ordered a nice, dry champagne, it began to look to Bingo as if the bill for this binge was going to resemble something submitted to Congress by President Roosevelt in aid of the American Farmer.

However, though once or twice—notably when Oofy started wading into the caviare—he had to clench his fists and summon up all his iron self-control, he did not on the whole repine. Each moment, as the feast proceeded, he could see his guest becoming more and more mellow. It seemed merely a question of time before the milk of human kindness would come gushing out of him as if the dam had burst. Feeling that a cigar and liqueur ought just about to do the trick, Bingo ordered them: and Oofy, unbuttoning the last three buttons of his waistcoat, leaned back in his chair.

"Well," said Oofy, beaming, "this will certainly be something to tell my grandchildren. I mean, that I once lunched with a member of the Drones Club and didn't get stuck with the bill. Listen, Bingo, I'd like to do something for you in return."

Bingo felt like some great actor who has received his cue. He leaned forward and relighted Oofy's cigar with a loving hand. He also flicked a speck of dust off his coat-sleeve.

"And what I'm going to do is this. I'm going to give you a tip. On these races this afternoon. Back Spotted Dog for the *Prix Honoré Sauvan*. A sure winner."

"Thanks, Oofy, old man," said Bingo. "That's splendid news. If you will lend me a tenner, then, Oofy, old boy, I'll put it on."

"What do you want me to lend you a tenner for?"

"Because, after I've paid the lunch bill, Oofy, old chap, I shan't have any money."

"You won't need any money," said Oofy, and Bingo wondered how many more people were going to make this blithering remark to him. "My London bookie is staying here. He will accommodate you in credit, seeing that you are a friend of mine."

"But doesn't it seem a pity to bother him with a lot of extra book-keeping, Oofy, old fellow?" said Bingo, flicking another speck of dust off Oofy's other coat-sleeve. "Much better if you would just lend me a tenner."

"Joking aside," said Oofy, "I think I'll have another kümmel."

And it was at this moment, when the conversation appeared to have reached a deadlock and there seemed no hope of finding a formula, that a stout, benevolent-looking man approached their table. From the fact that he and Oofy at once began to talk odds and figures, Bingo deduced that this must be the bookie from London.

"And my friend, Mr. Little," said Oofy, in conclusion, "wants a tenner on Spotted Dog for the *Prix Honoré Sauvan*."

And Bingo was just about to shake his head and say that he didn't think his wife would like him to bet, when the glorious Riviera sunshine, streaming in through the window by which they sat, lit up Oofy's face and he saw that it was a perfect mass of spots. A moment later, he perceived that the bookie had a pink spot on his nose and the waiter, who was now bringing the bill, a bountifully spotted forehead. A thrill shot through him. These things, he knew, are sent to us for a purpose.

"Right ho," he said. "A tenner at the current odds."

And then they all went off to the races. The *Prix Honoré Sauvan* was the three o'clock. A horse called Lilium won it. Kerry second, Maubourget third, Ironside fourth, Irresistible fifth, Sweet and Lovely sixth, Spotted Dog seventh. Seven ran. So there was Bingo owing ten quid to this bookie and not a chance of a happy ending unless the fellow would consent to let the settlement stand over for a bit.

So he buttonholed the bookie and suggested this, and the bookie said "Certainly."

"Certainly," said the bookie. He put his hand on Bingo's shoulder and patted it. "I like you, Mr. Little," he said.

"Do you?" said Bingo, putting his hand on the bookie's and patting that. "Do you, old pal?"

"I do indeed," said the bookie. "You remind me of my little boy Percy, who took the knock the year Worcester Sauce won the Jubilee Handicap. Bronchial trouble. So when you ask me to wait for my money, I say of course I'll wait for my money. Suppose we say till next Friday?"

Bingo blenched a bit. The period he had had in mind had been something more along the lines of a year or eighteen months.

"Well," he said, "I'll try to brass up then . . . but you know how it is . . . you mustn't be disappointed if . . . this world-wide money shortage . . . circumstances over which I have no control . . ."

"You think you may not be able to settle?"

"I'm a bit doubtful."

The bookie pursed his lips.

"I do hope you will," he said, "and I'll tell you why. It's silly to be superstitious, I know, but I can't help remembering that every single bloke that's ever done me down for money has had a

nasty accident occur to him. Time after time, I've seen it happen."

"Have you?" said Bingo, beginning to exhibit symptoms of bronchial trouble, like the late Percy.

"I have, indeed," said the bookie. "Time after time after time. It almost seems like some kind of fate. Only the other day there was a fellow with a ginger moustache named Watherspoon. Owed me fifty for Plumpton and pleaded the Gaming Act. And would you believe it, less than a week later he was found unconscious in the street—must have got into some unpleasantness of some kind —and had to have six stitches."

"Six!"

"Seven. I was forgetting the one over his left eye. Makes you think, that sort of thing does. Hoy, Erbut," he called.

A frightful plugugly appeared from nowhere, as if he had been a Djinn and the bookie had rubbed a lamp.

"Erbut," said the bookie, "I want you to meet Mr. Little, Erbut. Take a good look at him. You'll remember him again?"

Herbert drank Bingo in. His eye was cold and grey, like a parrot's.

"Yus," he said. "Yus, I won't forget him."

"Good," said the bookie. "That will be all, Erbut. Then about that money, Mr. Little, we'll say Friday without fail, shall we?"

Bingo tottered away and sought out Oofy.

"Oofy, old man," he said, "it is within your power to save a human life."

"Well, I'm jolly well not going to," said Oofy, who had now got one of his dyspeptic headaches. "The more human lives that aren't saved, the better I shall like it. I loathe the human race. Any time it wants to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel, it will be all right with me."

"If I don't get a tenner by Friday, a fearful bounder named Erbut is going to beat me into a pulp."

"Good," said Oofy, brightening a little. "Capital. Splendid. That's fine."

Bingo then caught the 'bus back to Monte Carlo.

That night he dressed for dinner moodily. He was unable to discern the bluebird. In three months from now he would be getting another quarter's allowance, but a fat lot of good that would be. In far less than three months, if he had read aright the message in Erbut's eyes, he would be in some hospital or nursing home with stitches all over him. How many stitches, time alone

could tell. He fell to musing on Watherspoon. Was it, he wondered, to be his fate to lower that ginger-moustached man's melancholy record?

His thoughts were still busy with the stitch outlook, when the telephone rang.

"Hullo," said a female voice. "Is that Rosie?"

"No," said Bingo, and might have added that the future was not either. "I'm Mr. Little."

"Oh, Mr. Little, this is Dora Spurgeon. Can I speak to Rosie?"

"She isn't here."

"Well, when she comes in, will you tell her that I'm just off to Corsica in some people's yacht. We leave in an hour, so I shan't have time to come over and see her, so will you give her my love and tell her I am sending the brooch back."

"Brooch?"

"She leant me her brooch when I left London. I think it's the one you gave her on her birthday. She told me to take special care of it, and I don't feel it's safe having it with me in Corsica—so many brigands about—so I am sending it by registered post to the Hôtel de Paris. Good-bye, Mr. Little. I must rush."

Bingo hung up the receiver and sat down on the bed to think this over. Up to a point, of course, the situation was clear. Dora Spurgeon, a muddle-headed boob if ever there was one, obviously supposed that Mrs. Bingo had accompanied him to Monte Carlo. No doubt Mrs. Bingo had gone to some pains in her telephone call to make it thoroughly clear that she was remaining in London, but it was no good trying to drive things into a head like Dora Spurgeon's by means of the spoken word. You needed a hammer. The result was that on the morrow that brooch which he had given Mrs. Bingo would arrive at the hotel.

So far, as I say, Bingo found nothing to perplex him. But what he could not make up his mind about was this—should he, after he had pawned the brooch, send the proceeds straight to that bookie? Or should he take the money and go and have a whack at the Casino?

Far into the silent night he pondered without being able to reach a decision, but next morning everything seemed to clarify, as is so often the way after a night's sleep, and he wondered how he could ever have been in doubt. Of course he must have a whack at the Casino.

The catch about sending the money to the bookie was that, while this policy would remove from his future the dark shadow or Erbut, it would not make for contentment and happiness in the home. When Mrs. Bingo discovered that he had shoved her brooch up the spout in order to pay a racing debt, friction would ensue. He unquestionably had a moral claim on the brooch—bought with his hard-earned money—the thing, you might say, was really his to do what he liked with—nevertheless, something told him that friction would ensue.

By going and playing his system he would avoid all unpleasantness. It was simply a matter of strolling into the Rooms and taking the stuff away.

And, as it turned out, he couldn't have paid off Erbut's bookie, anyway, because the local pop-shop would only give him a fiver on the brooch. He pleaded passionately for more, but the cove behind the counter was adamant. So, taking the fiver, he lunched sparingly at a pub up the hill, and shortly after two o'clock was in the arena, doing his stuff.

I have never been able to quite get the hang of that system of Bingo's. He has explained it to me a dozen times, but it remains vague. However, the basis of it, the thing that made it so frightfully ingenious, was that instead of doubling your stake when you lost, as in all these other systems, you doubled it when you won. It involved a lot of fancy work with a pencil and a bit of paper, because you had to write down figures and add figures and scratch figures out, but that, I gathered, was the nub of the thing—you doubled up when you won, thus increasing your profits by leaps and bounds and making the authorities look pretty sick.

The only snag about it was that in order to do this you first had to win, which Bingo didn't.

I don't suppose there is anything—not even Oofy Prosser—that has a nastier disposition than the wheel at Monte Carlo. It seems to take a sinister pleasure in doing down the common people. You can play mentally by the hour and never get a losing spin, but once you put real money up the whole aspect of things alters. Poor old Bingo hadn't been able to put a foot wrong so long as he stuck to paper punting, but he now found himself in the soup from the start.

There he stood, straining like a greyhound at the leash, waiting for his chance of doubling up, only to see all his little capital raked

in except one solitary hundred-franc chip. And when with a weary gesture he bunged this on Black, up came Zero and it was swept away.

And scarcely had he passed through this gruelling spiritual experience, when a voice behind him said, "Oh there you are!" and, turning, he found himself face to face with Mrs. Bingo.

He stood gaping at her, his heart bounding about inside him like an adagio dancer with nettlerash. For an instant, he tells me, he was under the impression that this was no flesh and blood creature that stood before him, but a phantasm. He thought that she must have been run over by a 'bus or something in London and that this was her spectre looking in to report, as spectres do.

"You!" he said, like someone in a play.

"I've just arrived," said Mrs. Bingo, very merry and bright.

"I—I didn't know you were coming."

"I thought I would surprise you," said Mrs. Bingo, still bubbling over with joyous animation. "You see, what happened was that I was talking to Millie Pringle about my book, and she said that it was no use getting local colour about the Rooms, because a man like Lord Peter Shipbourne would never go to the Rooms—he would do all his playing at the Sporting Club. And I was just going to wire you to go there, when Mrs. Carrie Melrose Bopp trod on a banana-skin in the street and sprained her ankle, and the luncheon was postponed, so there was nothing to prevent me coming over, so I came. Oh, Bingo, darling, isn't this jolly!"

Bingo quivered from cravat to socks. The adjective "jolly" was not the one he would have selected. And it was at this point that Mrs. Bingo appeared to observe for the first time that her loved one was looking like a corpse that has been left out in the rain for a day or two.

"Bingo!" she cried. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Bingo. "Nothing. Matter? How do you mean?"

"You look . . ." A wifely suspicion shot through Mrs. Bingo. She eyed him narrowly. "You haven't been gambling?"

"No, no," said Bingo. He is a fellow who is rather exact in his speech, and the word "gambling", to his mind, implied that a chap had a chance of winning. All that he had done, he felt, had been to take his little bit of money and give it to the Administra-

tion. You couldn't describe that as gambling. More like making a donation to a charity. "No, no," he said. "Rather not."

"I'm so glad. Oh, by the way, I found a letter from Dora Spurgeon at the hotel. She said she was sending my brooch. I suppose it will arrive this afternoon."

Bingo's gallant spirit was broken. It seemed to him that this was the end. It was all over, he felt, except the composition of the speech in which he must confess everything. And he was just running over in his mind a few opening remarks, beginning with the words "Listen, darling," when his eye fell on the table, and there on Black was a pile of chips, worth in all no less than three thousand, two hundred francs—or, looking at it from another angle, about forty quid at that date. And as he gazed at them, wondering which of the lucky stiffs seated round the board had got ahead of the game to that extent, the croupier at the bottom of the table caught his eye and smirked congratulatingly, as croupiers do when somebody has won a parcel and they think that there is going to be something in it for them in the way of largess.

And Bingo, tottering on his base, suddenly realized that this piled up wealth belonged to him. It was the increment accruing from that last hundred francs of his.

What he had forgotten, you see, was that though, when Zero turns up, those who have betted on numbers, columns, and what not get it in the neck, stakes on the even chances aren't scooped up—they are what is called put in prison. I mean, they just withdraw into the background for the moment, awaiting the result of the next spin. And, if that wins, out they come again.

Bingo's hundred francs had been on Black, so Zero had put it in prison. And then, presumably, Black must have turned up, getting it out again. And, as he hadn't taken it off, it had, of course, stayed on Black. And then, while he was immersed in conversation with Mrs. Bingo about brooches, the wheel, from being a sort of mechanical Oofy Prosser, had suddenly turned into a Santa Claus.

Seven more times it had come up Black, putting Bingo in the position in which that system of his ought to have put him, viz., of doubling up when he won. And the result, as I say, was that the loot now amounted to the colossal sum of forty quid, more than double what he required in order to be able to pay off all his obligations and look the world in the eye again.

The relief was so terrific that Bingo tells me he came within a

toucher of swooning. And it was only as he was about to snatch the stuff up and trouser it and live happily ever after—he had, indeed, actually poised himself for the spring—that he suddenly saw that there was a catch. To wit, that if he did, all must be discovered. Mrs. Bingo would know that he had been gambling, she would speedily ascertain the source whence had proceeded the money he had been gambling with, and the home, if not actually wrecked, would unquestionably become about as hot for him as the inside of a baked potato.

And yet, if he left the doubloons where they were, the next spin might see them all go down the drain.

I expect you know the expression "A man's cross-roads" Those were what Bingo was at at this juncture.

There seemed just one hope—to make a face at the croupier and do it with such consummate skill that the other would see that he wanted those thirty-two hundred francs taken off the board and put on one side till he was at liberty to come and collect. So he threw his whole soul into a face, and the croupier nodded intelligently and left the money on. Bingo, he saw, was signalling to him to let the works ride for another spin, and he admired his sporting spirit. He said something to the other croupier in an undertone—no doubt "*Quel homme!*" or "*Epatant!*" or something of that kind.

And the wheel, which now appeared definitely to have accepted the role of Bingo's rich uncle from Australia, fetched up another Black.

Mrs. Bingo was studying the gamesters. She didn't seem to think much of them.

"What dreadful faces these people have," she said.

Bingo did not reply. His own face at this moment was nothing to write home about, resembling more than anything else that of an anxious fiend in Hell. He was watching the wheel revolve.

It came up Black again, bringing his total to twelve thousand, eight hundred.

And now at last it seemed that his tortured spirit was to be at rest. The croupier, having shot another smirk in his direction, was leaning forward to the pile of chips and had started scooping. Yes, all was well. At the eleventh hour the silly ass had divined the message of that face of his and was doing the needful.

Bingo drew a deep, shuddering breath. He felt like one who

had passed through the furnace and, though a bit charred in spots, can once more take up the burden of life with an easy mind. Twelve thousand, eight hundred francs . . . Gosh! It was over a hundred and fifty quid, more than he had ever possessed at one time since the Christmas, three years ago, when his Uncle Wilberforce had come over all Dickensy as the result of lemon punch and had given him a cheque on which next day he had vainly tried to stop payment. There was a frowst in the Rooms which you could have cut with a knife, but he drew it into his lungs as if it had been the finest ozone. Birds seemed to be twittering from the ceiling and soft music playing everywhere.

And then the world went to pieces again. The wheel had begun to spin, and there on Black lay twelve thousand francs. The croupier, though he had scooped, hadn't scooped enough. All he had done was to remove from the board the eight hundred. On that last coup, you see, Bingo had come up against the limit. You can't have more than twelve thousand on an even chance.

And, of course, eight hundred francs was no use to him whatever. It would enable him to pay off Erbut and the bookie, but what of the brooch?

It was at this point that he was aware that Mrs. Bingo was saying something to him. He came slowly out of his trance with a Where-am-I look.

"Eh?" he said.

"I said, 'Don't you think so?' "

"Think so?"

"I was saying that it didn't seem much good wasting any more time in here. Millie Pringle was quite right. Lord Peter Shipbourne would never dream of coming to a place like this. He would never stand the smell, for one thing. I have drawn him as a most fastidious man. So shall I go on to the Sporting Club . . . Bingo?"

Bingo was watching the wheel, tense and rigid. He was tense and rigid, I mean, not the wheel. The wheel was spinning.

"Bingo!"

"Hullo?"

"Shall I go on to the Sporting Club and pay our entrance fees?"

A sudden bright light came into Bingo's face, rendering it almost beautiful. His brow was bedewed with perspiration, and

he rather thought his hair had turned snowy white, but the map was shining like the sun at noon, and he beamed as he had seldom beamed before.

For the returns were in. The wheel had stopped. And once again Black had come up, and even now the croupier was removing twelve thousand francs from the pile and adding them to the eight hundred before him.

"Yes, do," said Bingo. "Do. Yes, do. That'll be fine. Splendid. I think I'll just stick on here for a minute or two. I like watching these weird blokes. But you go on and I'll join you."

Twenty minutes later he did so. He walked into the Sporting Club a little stiffly, for there were forty-eight thousand francs distributed about his person, some of it in his pockets, some of it in his socks, and quite a good deal tucked inside his shirt. He did not see Mrs. Bingo at first: then he caught sight of her sitting over in the bar with a bottle of Vittel in front of her.

"What ho, what ho," he said, lumbering up.

Then he paused, for it seemed to him that her manner was rummy. Her face was sad and set, her eyes dull. She gave him an odd look, and an appalling suspicion struck him amidships. Could it be, he asked himself—was it possible that somehow, by some mysterious wifely intuition . . .

"There you are," he said. He sat down beside her, hoping that he wasn't going to crackle. "Er—how's everything?" He paused. She was still looking rummy. "I've got that brooch," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I—er—thought you might like to have it, so I—ah—nipped out and got it."

"I'm glad it arrived safely . . . Bingo!" said Mrs. Bingo.

She was staring sombrely before her. Bingo's apprehension increased. He now definitely feared the worst. It was as if he could feel the soup plashing about his ankles. He took her hand in his and pressed it. It might, he felt, help. You never knew.

"Bingo," said Mrs. Bingo, "we always tell each other everything, don't we?"

"Do we? Oh, yes. Yes."

"Because when we got married, we decided that that was the only way. I remember your saying so on the honeymoon."

"Yes," said Bingo, licking his lips and marvelling at the depths of fatheadedness to which men can sink on their honeymoons.

"I'd hate to feel that you were concealing anything from me. It would make me wretched."

"Yes," said Bingo.

"So if you had been gambling, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

Bingo drew a deep breath. It made him crackle all over, but he couldn't help that. He needed air. Besides, what did it matter now if he crackled like a forest fire? He threw his mind back to those opening sentences which he had composed.

"Listen, darling," he began.

"So I must tell you," said Mrs. Bingo. "I've just made the most dreadful fool of myself. When I came in here, I went over to that table there to watch the play, and suddenly something came over me. . . ."

Bingo uttered a snort which rang through the Sporting Club like a bugle.

"You didn't have a pop?"

"I lost over two hundred pounds in ten minutes——Oh, Bingo, can you ever forgive me?"

Bingo had still got hold of her hand, for he had been relying on the soothing effects of hanging on to it during the remarks which he had outlined. He squeezed it lovingly. Not immediately, however, because for perhaps half a minute he felt so boneless that he could not have squeezed a grape.

"There, there!" he said.

"Oh, Bingo!"

"There, there, there!"

"You do forgive me?"

"Of course. Of course."

"Oh, Bingo," cried Mrs. Bingo, her eyes like twin stars, and damp ones at that, "there's nobody like you in the world.

"Would you say that?"

"You remind me of Sir Galahad. Most husbands——"

"Ah," said Bingo, "but I understand these sudden impulses. I don't have them myself, but I understand them. Not another word. Good gosh, what's a couple of hundred quid, if it gave you a moment's pleasure?"

His emotions now almost overpowered him, so strenuously did they call for an outlet. He wanted to shout, but he couldn't shout —the croupiers would object. He wanted to give three cheers, but he couldn't give three cheers—the barman wouldn't like it. He

wanted to sing, but he couldn't sing—the customers would complain.

His eye fell on the bottle of Vittel.

"Ah!" said Bingo. "Darling!"

"Yes, darling?"

"Watch, darling," said Bingo. "I place the bottle so. Then, maintaining a perfect equilibrium . . ."

2

Bingo and the Peke Crisis

A BEAN was showing his sore leg to some Eggs and Piefaces in the smoking-room of the Drones Club, when a Crumpet came in. Having paused at the bar to order an Annie's Night Out, he made his way to the group.

"What," he asked, "is the trouble?"

It was a twice—or even more than that—told tale, but the Bean embarked upon it without hesitation.

"That ass Bingo Little. Called upon me at my residence the day before yesterday with a ravening Pekinese, and tried to land me with it."

"Said he had brought it as a birthday present," added one of the Eggs.

"That was his story," assented the Bean. "It doesn't hold water for an instant. It was not my birthday. And if it had been, he should have been well enough acquainted with my psychology to know that I wouldn't want a blasted, man-eating Peke with teeth like needles and a disposition that led it to take offence at the merest trifle. Scarcely had I started to deflect the animal to the door, when it turned like a flash and nipped me in the calf. And if I hadn't had the presence of mind to leap on to a table, the outcome might have been even more serious. Look!" said the Bean. "A nasty flesh wound."

The Crumpet patted his shoulder and, giving as his reason the fact that he was shortly about to lunch, asked the other to redrape the limb.

"I don't wonder that the episode has left you in something of a twitter," he said, "But I am in a position to give you a full explanation. I saw Bingo last night, and he told me all. And when you have heard the story, you will, I feel sure, agree with me that he is more to be pitied than censured. *Tout comprendre*," said the Crumpet, who had taken French at school, "*c'est tout pardonner*."

You are all, he proceeded, more or less familiar with Bingo's

circumstances, and I imagine that you regard him as one of those rare birds who are absolutely on velvet. He eats well, sleeps well and is happily married to a charming girl well provided with the stuff—Rosie M. Banks, the popular female novelist, to wit—and life for him, you feel, must be one grand, sweet song.

But it seems to be the rule in this world that though you may have goose, it is never pure goose. In the most apparently Grade A ointment there is always a fly. In Bingo's case it is the fact that he seldom, if ever, has in his possession more than the merest cigarette money. Mrs. Bingo seems to feel that it is best that this should be so. She is aware of his fondness for backing horses which, if they finish at all, come in modestly at the tail of the procession, and she deprecates it. A delightful girl—one of the best, and the tree, as you might say, on which the fruit of Bingo's life hangs—she is deficient in sporting blood.

So on the morning on which this story begins it was in rather sombre mood that he seated himself at the breakfast-table and speared a couple of eggs and a rasher of ham. Mrs. Bingo's six Pekes frolicked about his chair, but he ignored their civilities. He was thinking how bitter it was that he should have an absolute snip for the two o'clock at Hurst Park that afternoon and no means of cashing in on it. For his bookie, a man who seemed never to have heard of the words "Service and Co-operation", had informed him some time back that he was no longer prepared to accept mere charm of manner as a substitute for money down in advance.

He had a shot, of course, at bracing the little woman for a trifle, but without any real hope of accomplishing anything constructive. He is a chap who knows when he is chasing rainbows.

"I suppose, my dear old in-sickness-and-in-health-er," he began diffidently, "you wouldn't care for me to make a little cash for jam to-day?"

"How do you mean?" said Mrs. Bingo who was opening letters behind the coffee apparatus.

"Well, it's like this. There's a horse——"

"Now, precious, you know I don't like you to bet."

"I would hardly call this betting. Just reaching out and gathering in the stuff is more the way I would describe it. This horse, you see, is called Pimpled Charlie——"

"What an odd name."

"Most peculiar. And when I tell you that last night I dreamed

that I was rowing in a boat on the fountain in Trafalgar Square with Oofy Prosser, you will see its extraordinary significance."

"Why?"

"Oofy's name," said Bingo in a low, grave voice, "is Alexander Charles, and what we were talking about in the boat was whether he ought not to present his collection of pimples to the nation."

Mrs. Bingo laughed a silvery laugh.

"You *are* silly!" she said indulgently, and Bingo knew that hope, never robust, must now be considered dead. If this was the attitude she proposed to take towards what practically amounted to a divine revelation, there was little to be gained by pursuing the subject. He cheesed it, accordingly, and the conversation turned to the prospects of Mrs. Bingo having a fine day for her journey. For this morning she was beetling off to Bognor Regis to spend a couple of weeks with her mother.

And he had just returned to his meditations after dealing with this topic, when he was jerked out of them by a squeal of ecstasy from behind the coffee-pot, so piercing in its timbre that it dislodged half an egg from his fork. He looked up and saw that Mrs. Bingo was brandishing a letter, beaming the while like billy-o.

"Oh, sweetie-pie," she cried, for it is in this fashion that she often addresses him, "I've heard from Mr. Purkiss!"

"This Purkiss being who?"

"You've never met him. He's an old friend of mine. He lives quite near here. He owns a children's magazine called *Wee Tots*."

"So what?" said Bingo, still about six parasangs from getting the gist.

"I didn't like to tell you before, darling, for fear it might not come to anything, but some time ago he happened to mention to me that he was looking out for a new editor for *Wee Tots*, and I asked him to try you. I told him you had had no experience, of course, but I said you were awfully clever, and he would be there to guide you, and so on. Well, he said he would think it over, but that his present idea was to make a nephew of his the editor. But now I've had this letter from him, saying that the nephew has been county-courted by his tailor, and this has made Mr. Purkiss think his nature is too frivolous, and he wants to see you and have a talk. Oh, Bingo, I'm sure he means to give you the job."

Bingo had to sit for a moment to let this sink in. Then he rose and kissed Mrs. Bingo tenderly.

"My little helpmeet!" he said.

He was extraordinarily bucked. The appointment, he presumed, carried with it something in the nature of a regular salary, and a regular salary was what he had been wanting for years. Judiciously laid out on those tips from above which he so frequently got in the night watches, he felt, such a stipend could speedily be built up into a vast fortune. And, even apart from the sordid angle, the idea of being an editor, with all an editor's unexampled opportunities for putting on dog and throwing his weight about, enchanted him. He looked forward with a bright enthusiasm to getting fellow-members of the Drones to send in contributions to the Kiddies' Korner, and then bunging them back as not quite up to his standard.

"He has been staying with his wife with an aunt at Tunbridge Wells, and he is coming back this morning, and he wants you to meet him under the clock at Charing Cross at twelve. Can you be there?"

"I can," said Bingo. "And not only there, but there with my hair in a braid."

"You will be able to recognize him, he says, because he will be wearing a grey tweed suit and a Homburg hat."

"I," said Bingo, with a touch of superiority, "shall be in a morning coat and the old topper."

Once again he kissed Mrs. Bingo, even more tenderly than before. And pretty soon after that it was time for her to climb aboard the car which was to take her to Bognor Regis. He saw her off at the front door, and there were unshed tears in her eyes as she made her farewells. For the poignancy of departure was intensified by the fact that, her mother's house being liberally staffed with cats, she was leaving the six Pekes behind her.

"Take care of them while I'm away," she murmured brokenly, as the animals barged into the car and got shot out again by Bagshaw, the butler. "You will look after them, won't you, darling?"

"Like a father," said Bingo. "Their welfare shall be my constant concern."

And he spoke sincerely. He liked those Pekes. His relations with them had always been based on a mutual affection and esteem. They licked his face, he scratched their stomachs. Pleasant give and take, each working for each.

"Don't forget to give them their coffee-sugar every night."

"Trust me," said Bingo, "to the death."

"And call in at Boddington and Biggs's for Ping-Poo's harness. They are mending it. Oh, and by the way," said Mrs. Bingo, opening her bag and producing currency, "when you go to Boddington and Biggs, will you pay their bill. It will save me writing out a cheque."

She slipped him a couple of fivers, embraced him fondly and drove off, leaving him waving on the front steps.

I mention this fact of his waving particularly, because it has so important a bearing on what followed. You cannot wave a hand with a couple of fivers in it without them crackling. And a couple of fivers cannot crackle in the hand of a man who has received direct information from an authoritative source that a seven-to-one shot is going to win the two o'clock race at Hurst Park without starting in his mind a certain train of thought. The car was scarcely out of sight before the Serpent had raised its head in this Garden of Eden—the Little home was one of those houses that stand in spacious grounds along the edge of Wimbledon Common —and was whispering in Bingo's ear: "How about it, old top?"

Now at ordinary times and in normal circumstances, Bingo is, of course, the soul of honesty and would never dream of diverting a Bond Street firm's legitimate earnings into more private and personal channels. But here, the Serpent pointed out, and Bingo agreed with him, was plainly a special case.

There could be no question, argued the Serpent, of doing down Boddington and Biggs. That could be dismissed right away. All it meant, if Bingo deposited these fivers with his bookie, to go on Pimpled Charlie's nose for the two o'clock, was that Boddington and his boy-friend would collect to-morrow instead of to-day. For if by some inconceivable chance Pimpled Charlie failed to click, all he, Bingo, had to do was to ask for a small advance on his salary from Mr. Purkiss, who by that time would have become his employer. Probably, said the Serpent, Purkiss would himself suggest some such arrangement. He pointed out to Bingo that it was not likely that he would have much difficulty in fascinating the man. Quite apart from the morning coat and the sponge-bag trousers, that topper of his was bound to exercise a spell. Once let Purkiss get a glimpse of it, and there would be very little sales-resistance from him. The thing, in short, was as good as in the bag.

It was with the lightest of hearts, accordingly, that Bingo

proceeded to London an hour later, lodged the necessary with his bookie, whose office was in Oxford Street, and sauntered along to Charing Cross Station, arriving under the clock as its hands pointed to five minutes to twelve. And promptly at the hour a stout elderly man in a grey tweed suit and a Homburg hat rolled up.

The following conversation then took place.

"Mr. Little?"

"How do you do?"

"How do you do? Lovely day."

"Beautiful."

"You are punctual, Mr. Little."

"I always am."

"A very admirable trait."

"What ho!"

And it was at this moment, just as everything was going as smooth as syrup and Bingo could see the awe and admiration burgeoning in his companion's eyes as they glued themselves on the topper, that out of the refreshment-room, wiping froth from his lips, came B. B. Tucker, Gents' Hosier and Bespoke Shirt Maker, of Bedford Street, Strand, to whom for perhaps a year and a quarter Bingo had owed three pounds, eleven and fourpence for goods supplied.

It just shows you how mental exhilaration can destroy a man's clear, cool judgment. When this idea of meeting under the clock at Charing Cross had been mooted, Bingo, all above himself at the idea of becoming editor of a powerful organ for the chicks, had forgotten prudence and right-hoed without a second thought. It was only now that he realized what madness it had been to allow himself to be lured within a mile of Charing Cross. The locality was literally stiff with shops where in his bachelor days he had run up little accounts, and you never knew when the proprietors of these shops were not going to take it into their heads, as B. B. Tucker had plainly done, to step round to the station refreshment-room for a quick one.

He was appalled. He knew how lacking in tact and *savoir-faire* men like B. B. Tucker are. When they see an old patron chatting with a friend, they do not just nod and smile and pass by. They come right up and start talking about how a settlement would oblige, and all that sort of rot. And if Purkiss was the sort of person who shrank in horror from nephews who got county-

courted by their tailors, two minutes of B. B. Tucker, Bingo felt, would undo the whole effect of the topper.

And the next moment, just as Bingo had anticipated, up he came.

"Oh, Mr. Little," he began.

It was a moment for the swiftest action. There was a porter's truck behind Bingo, and most people would have resigned themselves to the fact that retreat was cut off. But Bingo was made of sterner stuff.

"Well, good-bye, Purkiss," he said, and, springing lightly over the truck, was gone with the wind. Setting a course for the main entrance, he passed out of the station at a good rate of speed and was presently in the Embankment gardens. There he remained until he considered that B. B. Tucker had had time to blow over, after which he returned to the old spot under the clock, in order to resume his conference with Purkiss at the point where it had been broken off.

Well, in one respect, everything was fine, because B. B. Tucker had disappeared. But in another respect the posish was not so good. Purkiss also had legged it. He had vanished like snow off a mountain-top, and after pacing up and down for half an hour Bingo was forced to the conclusion that he wasn't coming back. Purkiss had called it a day. And in what frame of mind, Bingo asked himself, had he called it a day? Now that he had leisure to think, he remembered that as he had hurdled the truck he had seen the man shoot an odd glance at him, and it occurred to him that Purkiss might have gone off thinking him a bit eccentric. He feared the worst. An aspirant to an editorial chair, he knew, does not win to success by jumping over trucks in the presence of his prospective proprietor.

Moodily, he went off and had a spot of lunch, and he was just getting outside his coffee when the result of the two o'clock came through on the tape. Pimpled Charlie had failed to finish in the first three. Providence, in other words, when urging him to put his chemise on the animal, had been pulling his leg. It was not the first time that this had happened.

And by the afternoon post next day there arrived a letter from Purkiss which proved that his intuition had not deceived him. He read it, and tore it into a hundred pieces. Or so he says. Eight, more likely. For it was the raspberry. Purkiss, wrote Purkiss, had given the matter his consideration and had decided to make other arrangements with regard to the editorship of *Wee Tots*.

To say that Bingo was distrait as he dined that night would not be to overstate the facts. There was, he could see, a lot which he was going to find it difficult to explain to Mrs. Bingo on her return, and it was not, moreover, going to be any too dashed good when he had explained it. She would not be pleased about the ten quid. That alone would cast a cloud upon the home. Add the revelation that he had mucked up his chance of becoming Ye Ed., and you might say that the home would be more or less in the melting-pot.

And so, as I say, he was distrait. The six Pekes accompanied him into the library and sat waiting for their coffee-sugar, but he was too preoccupied to do the square thing by the dumb chums. His whole intellect was riveted on the problem of how to act for the best.

And then—gradually—he didn't know what first put the idea into his head—it began to steal over Bingo that there was something peculiar about these six Pekes.

It was not their appearance or behaviour. They looked the same as usual, and they behaved the same as usual. It was something subtler than that. And then, suddenly, like a wallop on the base of the skull, it came to him.

There were only five of them.

Now, to the lay mind, the fact that in a house containing six Pekes only five had rolled up at coffee-sugar-time would not have seemed so frightfully sinister. The other one is off somewhere about its domestic duties, the lay mind would have said—burying a bone, taking a refreshing nap, or something of the sort. But Bingo knew Pekes. Their psychology was an open book to him. And he was aware that if only five of them had clustered round when there was coffee-sugar going, there could be only five on the strength. The sixth must be A.W.O.L.

He had been stirring his coffee when he made the discovery, and the spoon fell from his nerveless fingers. He gazed at the Shape Of Things To Come, all of a doodah.

This was the top. He could see that. Everything else was by comparison trifling, even the trousering of Boddington and Biggs's ten quid. Mrs. Bingo loved these Pekes. She had left them with him as a sacred charge. And at the thought of what would ensue when the time came for him to give an account of his stewardship and he had to confess that he was in the red, imagina-

tion boggled. There would be tears . . . reproaches . . . oh-how-could-you's . . . Why, dash it, felt Bingo, with a sudden start that nearly jerked his eyeballs out of their sockets, it was quite possible that, taking a line through that unfortunate ten quid business, she might even go so far as to suppose that he had snitched the missing animal and sold it for gold.

Shuddering strongly, he leaped from his chair and rang the bell. He wished to confer with Bagshaw and learn if by any chance the absentee was down in the kitchen. But Bagshaw was out for the evening. A parlourmaid answered the bell, and when she had informed him that the downstairs premises were entirely free from Pekes, Bingo uttered a hollow groan, grabbed his hat and started out for a walk on Winbledon Common. There was just a faint chance—call it a hundred to eight—that the little blighter might have heard the call of the wild and was fooling about somewhere out in the great open spaces.

How long he wandered, peering about him and uttering chirruping noises, he could not have said, but it was a goodish time, and his rambles took him far afield. He had halted for a moment in quite unfamiliar territory to light a cigarette, and was about to give up the search, and totter home, when suddenly he stiffened in every limb and stood goggling, the cigarette frozen on his lips.

For there, just ahead of him in the gathering dusk, he had perceived a bloke of butlerine aspect. And this butler, if butler he was, was leading on a leash a Peke so identical with Mrs. Bingo's gang that it could have been signed up with the troupe without exciting any suspicions whatever. Pekes, as you are probably aware, are either beige and hairy or chestnut and hairy. Mrs. Bingo's were chestnut and hairy.

The sight brought new life to Bingo. His razor-like intelligence had been telling him for some time that the only possible solution of the impasse was to acquire another Peke and add it to the strength, and the snag about that was, of course, that Pekes cost money—and of money at the moment he possessed but six shillings and a little bronze.

His first impulse was to leap upon this butler and choke the animal out of him with his bare hands. Wiser counsels, however, prevailed, and he contented himself with trailing the man like one of those fellows you read about who do not let a single twig snap beneath their feet. And presently the chap left the Common

and turned into a quiet sort of road and finished up by going through a gate into the garden of a sizable house. And Bingo, humming nonchalantly, walked on past till he came to some shops. He was looking for a grocer's and eventually he found one and, going in, invested a portion of his little capital in a piece of cheese, instructing the man behind the counter to give him the ripest and breeziest he had in stock.

For Bingo, as I said before, knew Pekes, and he was aware that, while they like chicken, are fond of suet pudding and seldom pass a piece of milk chocolate if it comes their way, what they will follow to the ends of the earth and sell their souls for is cheese. And it was his intention to conceal himself in the garden till the moment of the animal's nightly airing, and then come out and make a dicker with it by means of the slab which he had just purchased.

Ten minutes later, accordingly, he was squatting in a bush, waiting for zero hour.

It is not a vigil to which he cares to look back. The experience of sitting in a bush in a strange garden, unable to smoke and with no company but your thoughts and a niffy piece of cheese, is a testing one. Ants crawled up his legs, beetles tried to muscle in between his collar and his neck, and others of God's creatures, taking advantage of the fact that he had lost his hat, got in his hair. But eventually his resolution was rewarded. A french window was thrown open, and the Peke came trotting out into the pool of light from the lamps within, followed by a stout, elderly man. And conceive Bingo's emotion when he recognized in this stout, elderly exhibit none other than old Pop Purkiss.

The sight of him was like a tonic. Until this moment Bingo had not been altogether free from those things of Conscience . . . not psalms . . . yes, qualms. He had had qualms about the lay-out. From time to time there crept over him a certain commiseration for the bloke whose household pet he was about to swipe. A bit tough on the poor bounder, he had felt. These qualms now vanished. After the way he had let him down, Purkiss had forfeited all claim to pity. He was a man who deserved to be stripped of every Peke in his possession.

The question, however, that exercised Bingo a bit at this juncture was how was this stripping to be done. If it was the man's intention to follow hard on the animal's heels till closing time, it was difficult to see how he was to be de-Peked without detection.

But his luck was in. Purkiss had apparently been entertaining himself with a spot of music on the radio, for when he emerged it was playing a gay rumba. And now, as radios do, it suddenly broke off in the middle, gave a sort of squawk and began to talk German. And Purkiss turned back to fiddle with it.

It gave Bingo just the time he needed. He was out of the bush in a jiffy, like a leopard bounding from its lair. There was one anxious moment when the Peke drew back with raised eyebrows and a good deal of that To-what-am-I-indebted-for-this-visit stuff, but fortunately the scent of the cheese floated to its nostrils before it could utter more than a *sotto voce* whoofle, and from then on everything went with a swing. Half a minute later, Bingo was tooling along the road with the Peke in his arms. And eventually he reached the Common, struck a spot which he recognized and pushed home.

Mrs. Bingo's Pekes were all in bed when he got there, and when he went and sprang the little stranger on them he was delighted with the ready affability with which they made him one of themselves. Too often, when you introduce a ringer into a gaggle of Pekes, there ensues a scrap like New Year's Eve in Madrid; but to-night, after a certain amount of tentative sniffing, the home team issued their O.K., and he left them all curled up in their baskets like so many members of the Athenaeum. He then went off to the library, and rang the bell. He wished, if Bagshaw had returned, to take up with him the matter of a stiff whisky and soda.

Bagshaw had returned, all right. He appeared, looking much refreshed from his evening out, and biffed off and fetched the fixings. And it was as he was preparing to depart that he said:

"Oh, about the little dog, sir."

Bingo gave a jump that nearly upset his snifter.

"Dog?" he said, in his emotion putting in about five d's at the beginning of the word. "What dog?" he said, inserting about seven w's in the "what".

"Little Wing-Fu, sir. I was unable to inform you earlier, as you were not in the house when Mrs. Little's message arrived. Mrs. Little telephoned shortly after luncheon, instructing me to send Wing-Fu by rail to Bognor Regis Station. It appears that there is an artist gentleman residing in the vicinity who paints animals' portraits, and Mrs. Little wished to have Wing-Fu's likeness done. I dispatched the little fellow in a hamper, and on my return to

the house found a telegram announcing his safe arrival. It occurred to me that I had better mention the matter to you, as it might have caused you some anxiety, had you chanced to notice that one of the dogs was missing. Good night, sir," said Bagshaw, and popped off.

He left Bingo, as you may well suppose, chafing quite a goodish deal. Thanks to Mrs. Bingo's lack of a sense of what was fitting having led her to conduct these operations through an underling instead of approaching him, Bingo, in her absence the head of the house, he had imperilled his social standing by becoming a dog-stealer. And all for nothing.

Remembering the agonies he had gone through in that bush—not only spiritual because of the qualms of conscience, but physical because of the ants, the beetles and the unidentified fauna which had got in his hair, you can't blame him for being pretty sick about the whole thing. He had a sense of grievance. Why, he asked, had he not been informed of what was going on? Was he a cipher? And, anyway, where was the sense of pandering to Wing-Fu's vanity by having his portrait painted? He was quite sidey enough already.

And the worst of it was that though he could see that everything now pointed to some swift, statesmanlike move on his part, he was dashed if he could think of one. It was in a pretty dark mood that he swallowed a second snort and trudged up to bed.

But there's nothing like sleeping on a thing. He got the solution in his bath next morning. He saw that it was all really quite simple. All he had to do was to take Purkiss's Peke back to the Purkiss shack, slip it in through the garden gate, and there he would be, quit of the whole unpleasant affair.

And it was only when towelling himself after the tub that he suddenly realized that he didn't know the name of Purkiss's house—not even the name of the road it was in—and that he had tacked to and fro so assiduously on his return journey that he couldn't possibly find his way back to it.

And, what was worse, for it dished the idea of looking him up in the telephone book, he couldn't remember Purkiss's name.

Oh, yes, he knows it now, all right. It is graven on his heart. If you stopped him on the street to-day and said, "Oh, by the way, Bingo, what is the name of the old blister who owns *Wee Tots*?" he would reply like a flash: "Henry Cuthbert Purkiss." But at

that moment it had clean gone. You know how it is with names. Well, when I tell you that during breakfast he was convinced that it was Winterbottom and that by lunch-time he had switched to Benjafield, you will see how far the evil had spread.

And, as you will recall, his only documentary evidence no longer existed. With a peevishness which he now regretted, he had torn the fellow's letter into a hundred pieces. Or at least eight.

At this juncture, Bingo Little was a broken man.

Stripping the thing starkly down to its bare bones, he saw that the scenario was as follows. Mrs. Bingo was a woman with six Pekes. When she returned from Bognor Regis, she would be a woman with seven Pekes. And his knowledge of human nature told him that the first thing a six-Peke woman does, on discovering that she has suddenly become a seven-Peke woman, is to ask questions. And to these questions what would be his answer?

It would, he was convinced, be perfectly useless for him to try to pretend that the extra incumbent was one which he had bought her as a surprise during her absence. Mrs. Bingo was no fool. She knew that he was not a man who frittered away his slender means buying people Pekes. She would consider the story thin. She would institute inquiries. And those inquiries must in the end lead her infallibly to this Winterbottom, or Benjafield, or whatever his name was.

It seemed to Bingo that there was only one course open to him. He must find the stowaway a comfortable home elsewhere, completely out of the Benjafield-Winterbottom zone, and he must do it immediately.

So now you understand why the poor old bird called upon you that day with the animal. And, as I said, you will probably agree that he was more to be p. than c. In this connection, he has authorized me to say that he is prepared to foot all bills for sticking-plaster, arnica, the Pasteur treatment and what not.

After your refusal to hold the baby, he appears to have lost heart. I gather that the scene was a painful one, and he did not feel like repeating it. Returning home, he decided that there was nothing to be done but somehow to dig up that name. So shortly after lunch he summoned Bagshaw to his presence.

"Bagshaw," he said, "mention some names."

"Names, sir?"

"Yes. You know. Like people have. I am trying to remember

a man's name, and it eludes me. I have an idea," said Bingo, who had now begun to veer towards Jellaby, "that it begins with a J."

Bagshaw mused.

"J, sir?"

"Yes."

"Smith?" said the ass.

"Not Smith," said Bingo. "And if you mean Jones, it's not as common as that. Rather a bit on the exotic side it struck me as, when I heard it. As it might be Jerningham or Jorkins. However, in supposing that it begins with a J, I may quite easily be mistaken. Try the A's."

"Adams, sir? Allen? Ackworth? Anderson? Arkwright? Aarons? Abercrombie?"

"Switch to the B's."

"Bates? Bulstrode? Burgess? Bellinger? Biggs? Bultitude?"

"Now do me a few C's."

"Collins? Clegg? Clutterbuck? Carthew? Curley? Cabot? Cade? Cackett? Cahill? Caffrey? Cahn? Cain? Caird? Cannon? Carter? Casey? Cooley? Cuthbertson? Cope? Cork? Crowe? Cramp? Croft? Crewe? . . ."

A throbbing about the temples told Bingo that in his enfeebled state he had had about enough of this. He was just waving a hand to indicate this, when the butler, carried along by his momentum, added:

"Cruickshank? Chalmers? Cutmore? Carpenter? Cheffins? Carr? Cartwright? Cadwallader?"

And something seemed to go off in Bingo's brain like a spring.

"Cadwallader!"

"Is that the gentleman's name, sir?"

"No," said Bingo. "But it'll do."

He had suddenly recalled that Cadwallader was the name of the grocer from whom he had purchased the cheese. Starting from that grocer's door, he was pretty sure that he could find his way to Chez Purkiss. His position was clear. Cadwallader ho! was the watchword.

The prudent thing, of course, would have been to postpone the expedition until darkness had fallen, for it is under cover of night that these delicate operations are best performed. But at this season of the year, what with summertime and all that, darkness fell so dashed late, and he was all keyed up for rapid action. Refreshing his memory with another look at Cadwallader's

address in the telephone book, he set out in the cool of the evening, hope in his heart and the Peke under his arm. And presently he found himself on familiar ground. Here was Cadwallader's grocery establishment, there was the road down which he had sauntered, and there a few moments later was the box hedge that fringed the Purkiss's domain and the gate through which he had entered.

He opened the gate, shoved the Peke in, bade it a brief farewell and legged it. And so home, arriving there shortly before six.

As he passed into the Little domain, he was feeling in some respects like a murderer who has at last succeeded in getting rid of the body and in other respects like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego on emerging from the burning fiery furnace. It was as if a great load had been lifted from him. Once, he tells me, in the days of his boyhood, while enjoying a game of football at school, he was compelled in pursuance of his duties to fall on the ball and immediately afterwards became the base of a sort of pyramid consisting of himself and eight beefy members of the opposing team with sharp elbows and cleated boots. Even after all these years, he says, he can still recall the sense of buoyancy and relief when this mass of humanity eventually removed itself from the small of his back. He was feeling exactly the same relief and buoyancy now. I don't know if he actually sang, but I shouldn't be at all surprised if he didn't attempt a roundelay or two.

Bingo, like Jonah, is one of those fellows who always come up smiling. You may crush him to earth, but he will rise again. Resilient is, I believe, the word. And he now found the future, if not actually bright, at least beginning to look for the first time more or less fit for human consumption. Mistily, but growing every moment more solid, there had begun to shape itself in his mind a story which might cover that business of the Boddington and Biggs ten quid. The details wanted a bit of polishing, but the broad, basic structure was there. As for the episode at Charing Cross Station, there he proposed to stick to stout denial. It might or might not get by. It was at least worth trying. And, in any event, he was now straight on the Peke situation.

Walking on the tips of his toes with his hat on the side of his head, Bingo drew near to the house. And it was at this point that something brushed against his leg with a cheery gurgle and, looking down, he saw that it was the Peke. Having conceived a warm regard for Bingo, and taking advantage of the fact that he

had omitted to close the Purkiss's gate, it had decided to toddle along with him.

And while Bingo stood rooted to the spot, staring wanly at the adhesive animal, along came Bagshaw.

"Might I inquire, sir," said Bagshaw, "if you happen to know the telephone number of the house at which Mrs. Little is temporarily residing?"

"Why?" asked Bingo absently, his gaze still gummed to the Peke.

"Mrs. Little's friend, Mr. Purkiss, called a short while back, desirous of obtaining information. He was anxious to telephone to Mrs. Little."

The wanness with which Bingo had been staring at the Peke was as nothing compared to the wanness with which he now stared at the butler. With the mention of that name, memory had returned to him, sweeping away all the Jellabys and Winterbottoms which had been clogging up his thought processes.

"Purkiss?" he cried, tottering on his base. "Did you say Purkiss?"

"Yes, sir."

"He has been calling here?"

"Yes, sir."

"He wanted to telephone to Mrs. Little?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he . . . did Mr. Purkiss . . . Had he . . . Had Mr. Purkiss . . . Did Mr. Purkiss convey the impression of having something on his mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"He appeared agitated?"

"Yes, sir."

"You gathered . . . you inferred that he had some urgent communication to make to Mrs. Little?"

"Yes, sir."

Bingo drew a deep breath.

"Bagshaw," he said, "bring me a whisky and soda. A large whisky and soda. One with not too much soda in it, but with the whisky stressed. In fact, practically leave the soda out altogether."

He needed the restorative badly, and when it came lost no time in introducing it into his system. The more he contemplated Purkiss's call, the more darkly sinister did it seem to him.

Purkiss had wanted to telephone to Mrs. Bingo. He had ap-

peared agitated. Facts like these were capable of but one interpretation. Bingo remembered the hat which he had left somewhere in the bush. Obviously, Purkiss must have found that hat, observed the initials in its band, leaped to the truth and was now trying to get hold of Mrs. Bingo to pour the whole story into her receptive ear.

There was only one thing to be done. Bingo shrank from doing it, but he could see that he had no other alternative. He must seek Purkiss out, explain all the circumstances and throw himself on his mercy, begging him as a sportsman and a gentleman to keep the whole thing under his hat. And what was worrying him was a grave doubt as to whether Purkiss was a sportsman and a gentleman. He had not much liked the man's looks on the occasion of their only meeting. It seemed to him, recalling that meeting, that Purkiss had had the appearance of an austere sort of bird, with that cold, distant look in his eyes which he, Bingo, had so often seen in those of his bookie when he was trying to get him to let the settlement stand over till a week from Wednesday.

However, the thing had to be done, and he set forth to do it. He made his way to the Purkiss's home, and the butler conducted him to the drawing-room.

"Mr. Little," he announced, and left him. And Bingo braced himself for the ordeal before him.

He could see at a glance that Purkiss was not going to be an easy audience. There was in his manner nothing of the genial host greeting the welcome popper-in. He had been standing with his back turned, looking out of the open french window, and he spun round with sickening rapidity and fixed Bingo with a frightful stare. A glare of loathing, Bingo diagnosed it as—the natural loathing of a ratepayer who sees before him the bloke who has recently lured away his Peke with cheese. And he felt that it would be necessary for him, if anything in the nature of a happy ending was to be arrived at, to be winning and spell-binding as never before.

"Well?" said Purkiss.

Bingo started to make a manly clean breast of it without preamble.

"I've come about that Peke," he said.

And at that moment, before he could say another word, there

barged down his windpipe, wiping speech from his lips and making him cough like the dickens, some foreign substance which might have been a fly—or a gnat—or possibly a small moth. And while he was coughing he saw Purkiss give a sort of despairing gesture.

"I was expecting this," he said.

Bingo went on coughing.

"Yes," said Purkiss, "I feared it. You are quite right. I stole the dog."

Bingo had more or less dealt with the foreign substance by this time, but he still couldn't speak. Astonishment held him dumb. Purkiss was looking like somebody in a movie caught with the goods. He was no longer glaring. There was a dull, hopeless agony in his eyes.

"You are a married man, Mr. Little," he said, "so perhaps you will understand. My wife has gone to stay with an ailing aunt at Tunbridge Wells. Shortly before she left, she bought a Pekinese dog. This she entrusted to my care, urging me on no account ever to allow it out of the house except on a lead. Last night, as the animal was merely going to step out into the garden for a few moments, I omitted the precaution. I let it run out by itself. I never saw it again."

He gulped a bit. Bingo breathed heavily a bit. He resumed.

"It was gone, and I saw that my only course was immediately to secure a substitute of similar appearance. I spent the whole of to-day going round the dog-shops of London, but without avail. And then I remembered that Mrs. Little owned several of these animals—all, as I recalled, singularly like the one I had lost. I thought she might possibly consent to sell me one of them."

He sighed somewhat.

"This evening," he went on, "I called at your house, to find that she was away and that I could not reach her by telephone. And it would be useless to write to her, for my wife returns to-morrow. So I turned away, and as I reached the gate something jumped against my leg. It was a Pekinese dog, Mr. Little, and the very image of the one I had lost. The temptation was too great . . ."

"You pinched it?" cried Bingo, shocked.

Purkiss nodded. Bingo clicked his tongue.

"A bit thick, Purkiss," he said gravely.

"I know, I know. I am fully conscious of the heinousness of

what I did. My only excuse must be that I was unaware that I was being observed." He heaved another sigh. "The animal is in the kitchen," he said, "enjoying a light supper. I will ring for the butler to bring it to you. And what my wife is going to say, I shudder to think," said Purkiss, doing so.

"You fancy that she will be upset when she returns and finds no Peke to call her Mother?"

"I do, indeed."

"Then, Purkiss," said Bingo, slapping him on the shoulder, "keep this animal."

He likes to think of himself at that moment. He was suave, kindly, full of sweetness and light. He rather imagines that Purkiss must have thought he had run up against an angel in human shape or something.

"Keep it?"

"Definitely."

"But Mrs. Little——?"

"Have no concern. My wife doesn't know from one day to another how many Pekes she's got. Just so long as there is a reasonable contingent messing about, she is satisfied. Besides," said Bingo, with quiet reproach, "she will have far too much on her mind, when she gets back, to worry about Pekes. You see, Purkiss, she had set her heart on my becoming editor of *Wee Tots*. She will be distressed when she learns of your attitude in that matter. You know what women are."

Purkiss coughed. He looked at Bingo, and quivered a bit. Then he looked at him again, and quivered a bit more. Bingo received the impression that some sort of spiritual struggle was proceeding within him.

"Do you *want* to edit *Wee Tots*, Mr. Little?" he said at length.

"I do, indeed."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"I should have thought that a young man in your position would have been too busy, too occupied——"

"Oh, no. I could have fitted it in."

A touch of hope came into Purkiss's manner.

"The work is hard."

"No doubt I should have capable assistants."

"The salary," said Purkiss wistfully, "is not large."

"I'll tell you what," said Bingo, inspired. "Make it larger."

Purkiss took another look, and quivered for the third time. Then his better self triumphed.

"I shall be delighted," he said in a low voice, "if you will assume the editorship of *Wee Tots*."

Bingo patted him on the shoulder once more.

"Splendid, Purkiss," he said. "Capital. And now, in the matter of a small advance of salary. . . ."

3

The Editor Regrets

WHEN Bingo Little's wife, the well-known female novelist Rosie M. Banks, exerted her pull and secured for Bingo the editorship of *Wee Tots*, that popular and influential organ which has done so much to mould thought in the nursery, a sort of literary renaissance swept the Drones Club. Scarcely an Egg, Bean, Pieface or Crumpet on the list of members but took pen in hand with the feeling that here was where he cashed in and got back some of the stuff that had gone down the drain at Ally Pally and Kempton Park.

It was a painful shock to the intelligentsia, accordingly, when they discovered that their old friend was not going to prove the geyser of easy money they had anticipated. In quick succession he turned down the Egg who wanted to do Racing Notes, the Bean with the inside stuff on Night Clubs, and the Pieface who suggested that he should be given a sort of roving commission to potter round the south of France and contribute gossipy articles of human interest from such centres as Cannes and Monte Carlo. Even a Crumpet who had known him since they were in sailor suits had his thoughtful piece on Some Little Known Cocktails declined with thanks.

"On the plea," said the Crumpet, "that his proprietor wouldn't like it."

"That's what he told me," said the Egg. "Who is this bally proprietor of Bingo's?"

"A man named Purkiss. It was through her life-long friendship with Mrs. Purkiss that Mrs. Bingo was able to get Bingo the job."

"Then Purkiss can have no red blood in him," said the Egg.

"Purkiss lacks vision," said the Bean.

"Purkiss is an ass," said the Pieface.

The Crumpet shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," he said. "My belief is that Bingo merely uses Purkiss as a blind or screen. I think the man is drunk with a sense of power and definitely enjoys rejecting contributions from outside talent. And one of these days he is going to get himself

into serious trouble by coming the heavy editor like this. In fact, not long ago he very nearly did so. Only the luck of the Littles saved him from taking a toss which threatened to jar his fat trouser-seat clean out of the editorial chair, never to return. I allude, of course, to the Bella Mae Jobson affair."

The Bean asked what the Bella Mae Jobson affair was, and the Crumpet, expressing surprise that he had not heard of it, said that it was the affair of Bella Mae Jobson.

The American authoress, he explained. Scarcely known in this country, she has for some years past been holding American childhood spellbound with her tales of Willie Walrus, Charlie Chipmunk, and other fauna. Purkiss, who had been paying a visit to New York, met her on the boat coming back, and she lent him *Charlie Chipmunk Up the Orinoco*. A single glance was enough to tell him that here was the circulation-building stuff for which *Wee Tots* had been waiting, and he entered into tentative negotiations for her whole output, asking her on arriving in London to look in at the office and fix things up with his editor—viz., Bingo.

Now, unfortunately, Purkiss's absence from the centre of things had caused Bingo to get it up his nose a bit. When on the spot, the other had a way of making criticisms and suggestions, and an editor, he tells me, feels shackled when a proprietor with bronchial catarrh keeps popping in all the time, trying to dictate the policy of the "Uncle Joe to His Chickabiddies" page. All through these last weeks of freedom, therefore, he had been getting more and more above himself, with the result that, when informed per desk telephone that a Miss Jobson waited without he just tapped his teeth with a pencil and said: "Oh, she does, does she? Well, bung her out and tell her to write. We do not see callers without an appointment."

He then returned to the "What a Tiny Girlie Can Do to Help Mother" feature, and was still roughing it out when the door opened and in walked Purkiss, looking bronzed and fit. And after a bit of Well-here-I-am-back-again-ing and Oh-hullo-Mr.-Purkiss-did-you-have-a-good-trip-ing, as is inevitable on these occasions, Purkiss said:

"By the way, Mr. Little, a Miss Jobson will be calling shortly."

Bingo gave a light laugh.

"Oh, jolly old Jobson?" he said airily. "She's been and gone, leaving not a wrack behind. I gave her the air."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Turfed her out," explained Bingo.

Purkiss reeled.

"You mean . . . you refused to see her?"

"That's right," said Bingo. "Busy. Busy, busy, busy. Much too busy to talk to females. I told her to write, stating her business legibly on one side of the paper only."

I don't know if any of you happened to see that picture, "The Hurricane", that was on not long ago. Briefly, the plot of it was that there was a bevy of unfortunate blighters on a South Sea island and the dickens of a howling tempest came along and blew them cross-eyed. I bring it up because Bingo tells me that very much the same sort of thing happened now. For some moments, he says, all he was conscious of was a vast atmospheric disturbance, with him swaying in the middle of it, and then gradually, Purkiss's remarks becoming clearer, he gathered that he had made something of a floater, and that this bird Jobson was a bird who should have been conciliated, sucked up to, given the old oil and generally made to feel that she was among friends and admirers.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, feeling that something in the nature of an apology was indicated. "I deeply regret the whole unfortunate occurrence. I was the victim of a misunderstanding. It never crossed my mind that the above was a sweet ginger specialising in chipmunks. The impression I received was of somebody trying to sell richly illustrated sets of Dumas on the easy payment plan."

Then, seeing that Purkiss had buried his face in his hands and hearing him mutter something about "God's gift to the nursery" and "ruin", he stepped across and gave him a kindly pat on the shoulder.

"Cheer up," he said. "You still have me."

"No, I haven't," said Purkiss. "You're fired."

And in words whose meaning there was no mistaking he informed Bingo that the end of the month would see his finish as Ye Ed., and that it was his, Purkiss's, dearest hope that when he, Bingo, finally left the premises, he would trip over the doormat and break his neck.

He, Purkiss, then withdrew.

His departure gave Bingo the opportunity for some intensive

thinking. And as you will readily appreciate, intensive thinking was just what the situation could do with a spot of.

It was on Mrs. Bingo's reactions that he found himself brooding for the most part. There were many reasons why it cut him to the quick to be forced to relinquish his grasp on the tiller of *Wee Tots*. The salary, though small, had come under the head of manna from heaven, and the holding of the post had filled him with a spiritual pride such as he had not experienced since he won the Woolly-Mat-Tatting Prize at his first kindergarten. But what really got in amongst him was the thought of what Mrs. Bingo was going to say on hearing the news.

The Bingo *menage*, as you are no doubt aware, is one that has been conducted from its inception on one hundred per cent Romeo and Juliet lines. She is devoted to him, and his ingrowing love for her is such that you would be justified in comparing them to a couple of turtle doves. Nevertheless, he was ill at ease. Any male turtle dove will tell you that, if conditions are right, the female turtle dove can spit on her hands and throw her weight about like Donald Duck. And it needed no diagram to show Bingo that conditions here were just right. Mrs. Bingo had taken a lot of trouble to get him this job, and when she found that through sheer fatheadedness he had chucked it away she would, something told him, have a lot of comment to make.

Little wonder, then, that the barometer of his soul pointed steadily to "Stormy". Out of the night that covered him, black as the pit from pole to pole, one solitary bit of goose presented itself—the fact that the head of the family was away at the moment, visiting friends in the country. This at least enabled him to postpone the springing of the bad tidings.

But the thought that the hour of that springing must inevitably come kept him in pretty much of a doodah, and to distract his mind he plunged into the life of pleasure. And it was at a bottle-party a couple of nights later that he found himself going like a breeze with a female of considerable attractions, and with indescribable emotion learned that her name was Jobson, Bella Mae.

It altered the whole outlook, enabling him to get an entirely new angle on the situation.

Until this moment, he had been feeling that his only chance of wangling a happy ending would be to put up a good, carefully constructed, plausible story. He had planned, accordingly, on Mrs. Bingo's return, to inform her quite frankly that he had been

relieved of his portfolio for giving Purkiss's girl-friend the raspberry, and then to go on to explain why he had taken this stand. He had felt, he would say, that he owed it to her not to allow himself to be closeted with strange women. Too often, he would tell her, female visitors pat editors on the knee or even straighten their ties, and his pure soul had shrunk from the thought of anything like that happening to a sober married man like himself. It might get by, or it might not get by. It was a straight, sporting venture.

But now he saw that he could do much better than this. He could obviate all necessity for such explanations byretain ing his job.

When I said that he found himself going like a breeze with this chipmunk-fancier, I used the expression in its most exact sense. I don't know if any of you have ever seen Bingo when he was going really well, but I can testify that at such times he does his stuff like a master. Irresistible charm about sums it up. Think of Ronald Colman, and you have the idea. Well, you will understand what I mean when I tell you that as early as the second cocktail B. M. Jobson was saying how lonely she felt in this big, strange city, and he was saying "There, there" and pointing out that this was a state of things that could readily be adjusted. They parted in a flurry of telephone numbers and good wishes, and he went home feeling that the thing was in the bag.

What he proposed to do, I need scarcely explain, was to keep after this tomato and bump up their ripening friendship to a point where she would be able to refuse him nothing. He would then tear off his whiskers and reveal himself as the editor of *Wee Tots*, whereupon she would let him have her frightful bilge on easy terms and he would go to Purkiss and say: "Well, Purkiss, and now how about it?" Upon which, of course, Purkiss would immediately fold him in a close embrace and issue a reprieve at the foot of the scaffold.

To this end, accordingly, he devoted all his energies. He took Bella Mae Jobson to the Zoo, the Tower of London, Madame Tussaud's, five matinées, seven lunches and four dinners. He also gave her a bunch of white heather, several packets of cigarettes, eleven lots of roses and a signed photograph. And came a day when she said she really must buy back. She was sailing for America on the following Wednesday, she said, and on the Tuesday she was going to give a lovely luncheon-party at her hotel suite and he must be the guest of honour.

Bingo accepted effusively. The moment, he realized, had come. He had got the thing all worked out. He would stick on till the other guests had gone and then, while she was still mellowed with lunch, spring his big scene. He didn't see how it could miss.

It was only when a telegram arrived from Mrs. Bingo on the Monday morning, announcing that she would be returning that evening, that he began to appreciate that there might be complications which he had not foreseen.

In normal circs., the return of the wife of his b. after a longish absence would have been enough to send Bingo singing about the house. But now he didn't emit so much as a single bar, and it was with a drawn and thoughtful face that he met her at the station round about six-thirty.

"Well, well, well," he said heartily, or as heartily as he could manage, embracing her on the platform. "This is fine! This is great! This is terrific! And what a surprise, what? I thought you were planning to put in rather longer in the provinces."

Mrs. Bingo registered astonishment.

"What, miss our wedding anniversary?" she cried. She paused, and he became aware that she was eyeing him fairly narrowly. "You hadn't forgotten that to-morrow was our wedding anniversary?"

Bingo, who had given a sharp, convulsive leap like a gaffed salmon, reassembled himself.

"Me?" he cried. "I should say not. I've been ticking off the days on the calendar."

"So have I," said Mrs. Bingo. "Oh, Bingo, darling, we'll have lunch to-morrow at that little place near Charing Cross, where we had our wedding breakfast. And we'll pretend we've just been married. Won't it be fun!"

Bingo swallowed a couple of times. He was having trouble with his Adam's apple.

"Stupendous," he said.

"Only it won't be quite the same, of course, because then you hadn't an important job to hurry back to."

"No," said Bingo.

"How is everything at the office, by the way?"

"Oh, fine."

"Is Mr. Purkiss still pleased with your work?"

"Fascinated," said Bingo.

But he spoke absently, and it was with a heavy heart that he rose next morning and toyed listlessly with a fried egg and bacon. Nor was he any chirpier when he reached the editorial sanctum. He could see no daylight.

It would be possible, of course, to pop in on Bella Mae in the course of the afternoon, but he saw only too clearly that that would not be the same thing at all. The way he had had it planned out, he was to have been the life and soul of the gathering all through lunch, winning all hearts with his gay wit; and then, when the last guest had tottered away, holding his sides, and his hostess was thanking him brokenly for making her party such a success, he would have given her the works. It would be very different barging in on her at four o'clock and trying to swing the deal in cold blood.

And then, after he had been sitting for a goodish time with his head in his hands, exercising every cell in his brain to its utmost capacity, he received an inspiration and saw what Napoleon would have done. A moment later, he was on the telephone, with Mrs. Bingo's silvery voice are-you-there-ing at the other end.

"Hullo, darling," he said.

"Hullo, angel," said Mrs. Bingo.

"Hullo, precious," said Bingo.

"Hullo, sweetie-pie," said Mrs. Bingo.

"I say, moon of my delight," said Bingo, "listen. A rather awkward thing has happened, and I should like your advice as to how to act for the best. There's a most important *littérateuse* we are anxious to land for the old sheet, and the question has arisen of my taking her out to lunch to-day."

"Oh, Bingo!"

"Now, my personal inclination is to tell her to go to blazes."

"Oh, no, you mustn't do that."

"Yes, I think I will. 'Nuts to you, *littérateuse*,' I shall say."

"No, Bingo, please! Of course you must take her to lunch."

"But how about our binge?"

"We can have dinner instead."

"Dinner?"

"Yes."

Bingo allowed himself to be persuaded.

"Now, that's an idea," he said. "There, I rather think, you've got something."

"Dinner will be just as good."

"Better. More suited to unbridled revelry."

"You won't have to hurry off after dinner."

"That's right."

"We'll go to a theatre and supper afterwards."

"We will, indeed," said Bingo, feeling how simple these things were, if only one used a bit of tact. "That, as I see it, is the exact programme."

"And, as a matter of fact," said Mrs. Bingo, "it's really rather convenient, because now I shall be able to go to Miss Jobson's luncheon-party, after all."

Bingo swayed like a jelly in a high wind.

"Miss who's luncheon-party?"

"Jobson. You wouldn't know her. An American writer named Bella Mae Jobson. Mrs. Purkiss rang up a little while ago, saying she was going and could I come along, because Miss Jobson has long been an admirer of my work. Of course, I refused. But now it's all right, and I shall be able to go. She sails to-morrow, so this is our last chance of meeting. Well, good-bye, my poppet, I mustn't keep you from your work any longer."

If Mrs. Bingo supposed that Bingo, having hung up the receiver, immediately returned to the task of assembling wholesome literature for the kiddies, she was gravely in error. For possibly a quarter of an hour after she had rung off, he sat motionless in his chair, using up time which Purkiss was paying him for in staring sightlessly before him and breathing in quick jerks. His whole aspect was that of a man who has unexpectedly been struck by lightning.

This, it seemed to him, was the end. He couldn't possibly roll up to the Jobson lunch, if Mrs. Bingo was going to be there. You see, in order not to divert her mind from the main issue, he had avoided informing Bella Mae that he was married. Rightly or wrongly, he had felt that better results were to be obtained by keeping this news item under his hat. And if she lugged Mrs. Bingo up to him and said, "Oh, Mr. Little, I wonder if you know Miss Rosie M. Banks?" and he replied, "Oh, rather. She's my wife," only embarrassment could ensue.

No, there was only one thing to be done. He must abandon all idea of retaining his job and go back to the plan he had originally sketched out, of explaining to Mrs. Bingo why he had refused to see Bella Mae Jobson that day when she called at the office. This,

he felt with the first stirring of optimism which so far had animated him, might go pretty well after the former had met the latter. For Bella Mae, as I have said, was a female of considerable personal attractions. She had a lissome form, surmounted by a map of elfin charm and platinum-blonde hair. Stranger things had happened than that Mrs. Bingo might approve his prudence in declining to be cooped up with all that sex-appeal.

Feeling somewhat better, he went out and dispatched a telegram to the Jobson, regretting his inability to be present at the festivities. And he was about to return to the office, when a sudden thought struck him amidships and he had to clutch at a passing lamp-post to keep himself from falling in his tracks.

He had remembered that signed photograph.

The whole question of signed photographs is one that bulks largely in married life. When husbands bestow them on external females, wives want to know why. And the present case was complicated by the fact that in doing the signing Bingo—with the best motives—had rather spread himself. Mere cordiality would have been bad enough, and he had gone a shade beyond the cordial. And the finished product was probably standing on the Jobson's mantelpiece and would be the first thing that Mrs. Bingo would see on entering the other's suite.

It was not an enterprise to which he in any sense of the phrase looked forward, but he saw that, if a major disaster was to be avoided and the solidity of the Bingo-Mrs. Bingo axis to be maintained, he would have to get hold of that photograph well in advance of the luncheon hour and remove it.

I don't know if you have ever called at an hotel with a view to pinching a signed photograph from one of the suites. If not, I may tell you that technical difficulties present themselves at the very outset—notably the problem of how the hell to get in. Bingo, inquiring at the desk, learned that Miss Jobson was not at home, and was for a moment encouraged by the information. It was only after he had sneaked up the stairs and was standing outside the locked door that he realized that this was not an end but a beginning.

And then, just as he was feeling that he was a mere puppet in the grip of a remorseless fate and that it wasn't any use going on struggling, he saw a maid coming along the corridor, and remembered that maids have keys.

It was a moment for exerting that charm of his to the uttermost. He switched it on and allowed it to play upon the maid like a searchlight.

"Oh, hullo, maid," he said. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," said the maid.

"Gosh!" said Bingo. "You have a nice, kind, open, tender-hearted face. I wonder if you would do something for me. First, however," he said, shoving across a ten-bob note, "take this."

"Thank you, sir," said the maid.

"The facts, briefly," said Bingo, "are these. I am lunching to-day with Miss Jobson."

"She's out," said the maid. "I saw her go along the passage with the little dog."

"Exactly," said Bingo. "And there you have put your finger on the nub. She's out, and I want to get in. I hate waiting in hotel lobbies. You know how it is. Bores come up and tell you their troubles. Cadgers come up and try to touch you. I shall be happier in Miss Jobson's suite. Could you possibly—here he ladled out another currency bill—"let me in?"

"Certainly, sir," said the maid, and did so.

"Thanks," said Bingo. "Heaven bless you, my dear old maid. Lovely day."

"Beautiful," said the maid.

He had scarcely crossed the threshold before he perceived that he had done the shrewd thing in sweetening her. He was a quid down, and he could ill spare quids, but it had been worth every penny of the money. There, as he had anticipated, was the photograph, plumb spang in the middle of the mantelpiece where it could not have failed to catch the eye of an incoming wife. To snatch it up and trouser it was with him the work of a moment, and he was just turning to the door to make the quick get away, when his attention was drawn to a row of bottles on the sideboard. There they stood, smiling up at him, and as he was feeling more than a little faint after his ordeal he decided to have one for the road before withdrawing.

So he sloshed some Italian vermouth into a glass, and sloshed some French vermouth on top of it, and was reaching for the gin, to start sloshing that, when his heart did three double somersaults and a swan-dive. There had come to his ears the rattle of a key in the door.

It is difficult to say what would really have been the right thing

to do in the circumstances. Some chaps, I suppose, would just have stayed put and tried to pass it off with jovial breeziness. Others might have jumped out of the window. But he wasn't feeling equal to jovial breeziness and the suite was on the fourth floor, so he took a middle course. He cleared the sofa in a single bound, and had scarcely gone to earth behind it when the door opened.

It was not Bella Mae Jobson who entered, but his old pal the maid. She was escorting another early popper-in. Through the gap at the bottom of his zareba he could see the concluding portion of a pair of trousers and a pair of boots. And when the lips above these trousers spoke, he found that this was no stranger but a familiar acquaintance. The voice was the voice of Purkiss.

"Thank you, my dear," said Purkiss.

"Thank *you*, sir," said the maid, leading Bingo to suppose that once more money had passed into her possession. He found himself brooding on the irony of the thing. Such a big day for the maid, I mean, and such a rotten one for him.

Purkiss coughed.

"I seem to be early."

"Yes, sir."

"Then, perhaps, to fill in the time, I might be taking Miss Jobson's dog for a run."

"Miss Jobson's out with the dog now, sir."

"Oh?" said Purkiss.

There was a momentary silence, and then the maid said that that was funny, and Purkiss asked what was funny.

"There ought to be another gentleman here," said the maid. "But I don't see him. Oh yes," she proceeded, as Bingo, who for some little while now had been inhaling fluff in rather large quantities, gave a hearty sneeze, "there he is, behind the sofa."

And the next moment Bingo was aware of an eye peering down at him from the upper regions. Purkiss's eye.

"Mr. Little!" cried Purkiss.

Bingo rose, feeling that it was useless to dissemble further.

"Ah, Purkiss," he said distantly, for they were not on good terms, and with what dignity he could muster, which was not much, he rose and made for the door.

"Hey!" cried Purkiss. "Just a minute."

Bingo carried on doorwards.

"If you wish to speak to me, Purkiss," he said, "you will find me in the bar."

But it was not thither that he immediately proceeded. His need for a bracer was urgent, but even more than a bracer he wanted air. He had been under the sofa only about three minutes, but as nobody had swept there for nearly six years quite a lot of mixed substances had found their way into his lungs. He was, indeed, feeling more like a dustbin than a man. He passed through the lobby and stood outside the door of the hotel, drinking in great draughts of the life-giving, and after a while began to feel better.

The improvement in his condition, however, was purely physical. Spiritually, he continued in the depths. As he reviewed the position of affairs, his heart struck a new low. He had secured the photograph, yes, and that was good, as far as it went. But it did not, he perceived, go so dashed far. If Purkiss was to be one of the guests at the Jobson lunch, he was still waist-high in the soup and likely to sink without trace at any moment.

He could envisage just what would occur at the beano. His tortured mind threw the thing into a sort of dialogue scene.

The Apartment of B. M. Jobson. Afternoon. Discovered—B. M. Jobson and Purkiss. Enter Mrs. Bingo.

MRS. BINGO: Cheerio. I'm Rosie M. Banks.

JOBSON: Oh, what ho, Miss Banks. Do you know Mr. Purkiss?

MRS. BINGO: You betcher. He owns the paper my husband is editor of.

JOBSON: You're married, then?

MRS. BINGO: Oh, rather. Name of Little.

JOBSON: Little? Little? Odd. I know a bird named Little. In fact, when I say "know", that's understating it a bit. He's been giving me the rush of a lifetime. "Bingo", mine calls himself. Some relation, perhaps.

MRS. BINGO:

But he preferred not to sketch in Mrs. Bingo's lines. He stood there groaning in spirit. And he had just groaned for about the fifteenth time, when a car drew up before him and through a sort of mist he saw Mrs. Bingo seated at the steering-wheel.

"Oh, Bingo, darling!" cried Mrs. Bingo. "What luck finding you here. Is this where you're lunching with your writer? What an extraordinary coincidence."

It seemed to Bingo that if he was going to put up any kind of a story, now was the time to put it up. In a few brief moments Mrs. Bingo would be entering the presence of the Jobson, with results as already indicated, and her mind must be prepared.

But beyond a sort of mixed snort and gurgle he found himself unable to utter, and Mrs. Bingo carried on.

"I can't stop a minute," she said. "I've got to rush back to Mrs. Purkiss. She's in great distress. When I got to her house, to pick her up and drive her here, I found her in a terrible state. Apparently her dog has been lost. I just came here to tell Miss Jobson that we shan't be able to lunch. Will you be an angel and ring her up from the desk and explain?"

Bingo blinked. The hotel, though solidly built, seemed to be swaying above him.

"You . . . what was that you said? You won't be able to lunch with——"

"No. Mrs. Purkiss wants me with her. She's gone to bed with a hot-water bottle. So will you ring Miss Jobson up? Then I can hurry off."

Bingo drew a deep breath.

"Of course, of course, of course, of course, of course," he said. "Oh, rather. Rather. Ring Miss Jobson up . . . tell her you and Mrs. Purkiss will not be among those present . . . explain fully. A simple task. Leave it to me, light of my life."

"Thank you, darling. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Bingo.

She drove off, and he stood there, his eyes closed and his lips moving silently. Only once in his life before had he been conscious of this awed sense of being the favourite son of a benevolent providence. That was at his private school, when the Rev. Aubrey Upjohn, his headmaster, in the very act of raising the cane to land him a juicy one on the old spot, had ricked his shoulder and had to postpone the ceremony indefinitely.

Presently, life returned to the rigid limbs and he tottered to the bar to have one quick, followed by another rather slower. And the first person he saw there, sucking down something pink, was Purkiss. He gave him an austere look, and settled himself at the farther end of the counter. Later on, it would presumably be his nauseous task to step across and inform the man of the tragedy which had come upon his home, but the thought of holding speech with him after the way he had behaved was so revolting

that he did not propose to do it until he had fortified himself with a couple of refreshers.

And he had had the first one and was waiting for the second, when he felt something pawing at his sleeve. He glanced round, and there was Purkiss with a pleading look in his eyes, like a spaniel trying to ingratiate itself with someone whom it knows to be allergic to dogs.

"Mr. Little."

"Well, Purkiss?"

"Mr. Little, it is in your power to do me a great kindness."

Well, I don't know what you would have replied to that, if you had been in Bingo's position—addressed in this fashion, I mean, by a man who had not only given you the push but in doing so had called you at least six offensive names. Personally, I would have said "Oh?" or possibly "Ho!" and that may have been what Bingo was intending to say. But before he could get going, Purkiss proceeded.

"Mr. Little, I am faced by a disaster so hideous that the mind reels, contemplating it, and only you can save me. At any moment now, my wife will be arriving here. We are lunching with Miss Jobson. Mr. Little, I appeal to you. Will you think of some suitable story and go and stand at the door and intercept her and prevent her coming to this luncheon-party? My whole future happiness depends on this."

At this juncture, Bingo's second refresher arrived and he sat sipping it thoughtfully. He could make nothing of all this, but he is a pretty intelligent chap, and he was beginning to see that circumstances had arisen which might culminate in him doing a bit of good for himself.

"It is imperative that my wife does not enter Miss Jobson's suite."

Bingo got outside the mixture, and laid the glass down.

"Tell me the whole story in your own words, Purkiss," he said.

Purkiss had produced a handkerchief, and was mopping his forehead with it. With his other hand he continued to massage Bingo's arm. His whole deportment was vastly different from what it had been when he had called Bingo those six offensive names.

"It was only late this morning," he said, "that Miss Jobson informed me on the telephone that she had invited my wife to be a guest at this luncheon-party—which, until then, I had supposed

would be a *tête-à-tête* between her and myself. I may mention that I have concluded negotiations with Miss Jobson for the publication of her brilliant works. I had presumed that over the luncheon-table we would discuss such details as illustrations and genneral make-up."

"Matters," said Bingo coldly, "more customarily left to the editor."

"Quite, quite, but as . . . yes, quite. But the point is, Mr. Little, that in order to secure this material from Miss Jobson I had been compelled to—ah—how shall I put it——"

"Bring a little pressure to bear?"

"Precisely. Yes, it is exactly what I did. It seemed to me that the end justified the means. *Wee Tots*, as I saw it, was standing at the cross-roads. Let me secure the works of Bella Mae Jobson, and the dear old paper would soar beyond reach of competition. Let her, on the other hand, go to one of my trade rivals, and it would sustain a blow from which it might not recover. So I left no stone unturned."

"And avenues?"

"Avenues, too. I explored them all."

Bingo pursed his lips.

"I have no wish to condemn you unheard, Purkiss," he said, "but all this begins to look a bit French. Did you kiss Miss Jobson?"

A violent start shook Purkiss from stem to stern.

"No, no, no, no!" he protested vehemently. "Certainly not. Most decidedly not. Nothing of that nature whatsoever. From start to finish our relations have been conducted with the utmost circumspection on my part, complete maidenly dignity on hers. But I took her to the National Gallery, the British Museum, and a matinée at Sadler's Wells. And then, seeing that she was weakening, I . . ."

His voice faltered and died away. Recovering it, he asked the barman for another of those pink ones for himself and whatever Bingo desired for Bingo. Then, when the tissue-restorers had appeared and he had drained his at a gulp, he found strength to continue.

"I gave her my wife's Pekinese."

"What!"

"Yes. She had admired the animal when visiting my house, and I smuggled it out in a hat-box when I left home this morning and

brought it to this hotel. Ten minutes later she had signed the contract. An hour later she apparently decided to include my wife in her list of guests. Two hours after that, she was informing me of this fact on the telephone, and I hastened here in the hope of being able to purloin the animal.

"But it was not to be. She had taken it for a run. Consider my position, Mr. Little. What am I to do if my wife enters Miss Jobson's suite and finds her in possession of this dog? There will be explanations. And what will be the harvest when those explanations have been made?" He broke off, quivering in every limb. "But why are we wasting time? While we sit talking here, she may be arriving. Your post is at the door. Fly, Mr. Little!"

Bingo eyed him coldly.

"It's all very well to say 'Fly!'," he said, "but the question that springs to the lips is, 'What is there in this for me?' Really, Purkiss, after your recent behaviour I rather fail to see why I should sweat myself to the bone, lugging you out of messes. It is true," he went on meditatively, "that I have just thought of a pippin of a story which cannot fail to head Mrs. Purkiss off when she arrives, but why should I bother to dish it out? At the end of this week I cease to be in your employment. It would be a very different thing, of course, if I were continuing as editor of *Wee Tots*——"

"But you are, Mr. Little, you are."

"—at a considerably increased salary——"

"Your salary shall be doubled."

Bingo reflected.

"H'm!" he said. "And no more muscling in and trying to dictate the policy of the 'Uncle Joe To His Chickabiddies' page?"

"None, none. From now on, none. You shall have a completely free hand."

"Then, Purkiss, you may set your mind at rest. Mrs. Purkiss will not be present at the luncheon-party."

"You guarantee that?"

"I guarantee it," said Bingo. "Just step along with me to the writing-room and embody the terms of our new contract in a brief letter, and I will do the needful."

4

Sonny Boy

ON the question of whether Bingo Little was ethically justified in bringing his baby into the club and standing it a milk straight in the smoking-room, opinion at the Drones was sharply divided. A Bean with dark circles under his eyes said that it was not the sort of thing a chap wanted to see suddenly when he looked in for a drop of something to correct a slight queasiness after an exacting night. A more charitable Egg argued that as the child was presumably coming up for election later on, it was as well for it to get to know the members. A Pieface thought that if Bingo did let the young thug loose on the premises, he ought at least to give the committee a personal guarantee for all hats, coats and umbrellas.

"Because if ever I saw a baby that looked like something that was one jump ahead of the police," said the Pieface, "it is this baby of Bingo's. Definitely the criminal type. It reminds me of Edward G. Robinson."

A Crumpet, always well informed, was able to throw a rather interesting light on the situation.

"I agree," he said, "that Algernon Aubrey Little is not a child whom I personally would care to meet down a dark alley, but Bingo assures me that its heart is in the right place, and as for his bringing it here and lushing it up, that is readily explained. He is grateful to this baby and feels that the best is none too good for it. By doing the right thing at the right time, it recently pulled him out of a very nasty spot. It is not too much to say, he tells me, that but for its intervention a situation would have been precipitated in his home life which might well have staggered humanity."

When in the second year of his marriage to Rosie M. Banks, the eminent female novelist, his union was blessed and this bouncing boy appeared on the London scene, Bingo's reactions (said the Crumpet) were, I gather, very much the same as yours. Introduced to the child in the nursing home, he recoiled with a

startled "Oi!" and as the days went by the feeling that he had run up against something red-hot in no way diminished.

The only thing that prevented a father's love from faltering was the fact that there was in his possession a photograph of himself at the same early age, in which he, too, looked like a homicidal fried egg. This proof that it was possible for a child, in spite of a rocky start, to turn eventually into a suave and polished boulevardier with finely chiselled features heartened him a good deal, causing him to hope for the best.

Meanwhile, however, there was no getting away from it that the little stranger was at the moment as pronounced a gargoyle as ever drained a bottle, and Bingo, finding that a horse of that name was running in the three o'clock at Plumpton, had no hesitation in putting ten pounds on it to cop. Always on the look-out for omens from on high, he thought that this must have been what the child had been sent for.

The failure of Gargoyle to finish in the first six left him in a position of considerable financial embarrassment. The tenner which he had placed on its nose was the last one he had, and its loss meant that he would have to go a month without cigarettes, cocktails, and those other luxuries which to the man of refinement are so much more necessary than necessities.

For there was no glittering prospect open to him of being able to touch the head of the house for a trifle to be going on with. Mrs. Bingo's last words, before leaving for Worcestershire some two weeks previously to see her mother through a course of treatment at the Droitwich brine baths, had contained a strong injunction to him not to bet in her absence; and any attempt on his part to palliate his action by showing that he had supposed himself to be betting on a certainty would, he felt, be badly received.

No, the cash, if it was to be raised, must be raised from some other source, and in these circumstances his thoughts, as they had so often done before, turned to Oofy Prosser. That it was never a simple task to get into Oofy's ribs, but one always calculated to test the stoutest, he would have been the first to concede. But it so happened that in the last few days the club's tame millionaire had shown himself unexpectedly friendly. On one occasion, going into the writing-room to dash off a letter to his tailor which he hoped would lead to an appeasement, Bingo had found him there, busy on what appeared to be a poem: and Oofy,

after asking him if he knew any good rhymes to "eyes of blue", had gone on to discuss the married state with him, giving it as his opinion that it was the only life.

The conclusion Bingo drew was that love had at last found Oofy Prosser, and an Oofy in love, he reasoned, might—nay, must—be an Oofy in a melting mood which would lead him to scatter the stuff in heaping handfuls. It was with bright confidence, accordingly, that he made his way to the block of flats in Park Lane where the other has his lair, and it was with a feeling that his luck was in that, reaching the front door, he met Oofy coming out.

"Oh, hullo, Oofy," he said. "Good morning, Oofy. I say, Oofy——"

I suppose years of being the official moneyed man of the Drones had given Oofy Prosser a sort of sixth sense. You might almost say that he is clairvoyant. Without waiting to hear more, he now made a quick sideways leap, like an antelope spotting a tiger, and was off in a cab, leaving Bingo standing there considering how to act for the best.

Taking a line through stoats and weasels, he decided that the only thing to do was to continue doggedly on the trail, so he toddled off to the Savoy Grill, whither he had heard the driver being told to drive, and arriving there some twenty minutes later found Oofy in the lobby with a girl. It was with considerable pleasure that he recognized in her an old pal, with whom in his bachelor days he had frequently trodden the measure, for this enabled him to well-well-well and horn in. And once Bingo has horned in, he is not easy to dislodge. A few minutes later, they were all seated round a table and he was telling the wine waiter to be sure to take the chill off the claret.

It didn't occur to him at the time, but, looking back, Bingo had a feeling that Oofy would have been just as pleased if he hadn't shown up. There was a sort of constraint at the meal. Bingo was all right. He prattled freely. And the girl was all right. She prattled freely, too. It was just that Oofy seemed not quite to have got the party spirit. Silent. Distrait. Absent-minded. Inclined to fidget in his chair and drum on the tablecloth with his fingers.

After the coffee, the girl said, Well, she supposed she ought to be hareing to Charing Cross and catching her train—she, it appeared, being headed for a country house visit in Kent. Oofy,

brightening a little, said he would come and see her off. And Bingo, faithful to his policy of not letting Oofy out of his sight, said he would come too. So they all tooled along, and after the train had pulled out Bingo, linking his arm in Oofy's, said:

"I say, Oofy, I wonder if you would do me a trifling favour?"

Even as he spoke, he tells me he seemed to notice something odd in his companion's manner. Oofy's eyes had a sort of bleak glazed look in them.

"Oh?" he said distantly. "You do, do you? And what is it, my bright young limpet? What can I do for you, my adhesive old porous plaster?"

"Could you lend me a tenner, Oofy, old man?"

"No, I couldn't."

"It would save my life."

"There," said Oofy, "you have put your finger on the insuperable objection to the scheme. I see no percentage in your being alive. I wish you were a corpse, preferable a mangled one. I should like to dance on your remains."

Bingo was surprised.

"Dance on my remains?"

"All over them."

Bingo drew himself up. He had his pride.

"Oh?" he said. "Well, in that case, tinkerty-tonk."

The interview then terminated. Oofy hailed a cab, and Bingo returned to his Wimbledon home. And he had not been there long when he was informed that he was wanted on the telephone. He went to the instrument and heard Oofy's voice.

"Hullo," said Oofy. "Is that you? I say, you remember me saying I would like to dance on your mangled remains?"

"I do."

"Well, I've been thinking it over——"

Bingo's austerity vanished. He saw what had happened. Shortly after they had separated, Oofy's better nature must have asserted itself, causing remorse to set in. And he was just about to tell him not to give it another thought, because we all say more than we mean in moments of heat, when Oofy continued:

"—thinking it over," he said, "and I would like to add 'in hobnailed boots'. Good-bye."

It was a tight-lipped and pensive Bingo Little who hung up the receiver and returned to the drawing-room, where he had been

tucking into tea and muffins. As he resumed the meal, the tea turned to wormwood and the muffins to ashes in his mouth. The thought of having to get through a solid month without cocktails and cigarettes gashed him like a knife. And he was just wondering if it might not be best, after all, to go to the last awful extreme of confessing everything to Mrs. Bingo, when the afternoon post came in, and there was a letter from her. And out of it, as he tore open the envelope, tumbled a ten-pound note.

Bingo tells me that his emotions at this moment were almost indescribable. For quite a while, he says, he remained motionless in his chair with eyes closed, murmuring: "What a pal! What a helpmeet!" Then he opened his eyes and started to read the letter.

It was a longish letter, all about the people at the hotel and a kitten she had struck up an acquaintance with and what her mother looked like when floating in the brine bath, and so on and so forth, and it wasn't till the end that the tenner got a mention. Like all women, Mrs. Bingo kept the big stuff for her postscript.

P.S. (she wrote).—I am enclosing ten pounds. I want you to go to the bank and open an account for little Algy with it. Don't you think it will be too sweet, him having his own little account and his own little wee passbook?

I suppose if a fairly sinewy mule had suddenly kicked Bingo in the face, he might have felt a bit worse, but not much. The letter fell from his nerveless hands. Apart from the hideous shock of finding that he hadn't clicked, after all, he thoroughly disapproved of the whole project. Himself strongly in favour of sharing the wealth, it seemed to him that the last thing to place in the hands of an impressionable child was a little wee passbook, starting it off in life—as it infallibly must—with capitalistic ideas out of tune with the trend of modern enlightened thought. Slip a baby ten quid, he reasoned, and before you knew where you were you had got another Economic Royalist on your hands.

So uncompromising were his views on the subject that there was a moment when he found himself toying with the notion of writing back and telling Mrs. Bingo—in the child's best interests—that he had received a letter from her stating that she was enclosing ten pounds, but that, owing doubtless to a momentary

carelessness on her part, no ten pounds had arrived with it. However, he dismissed the idea—not because it was not good, but because something told him that it was not good enough. Mrs. Bingo was a woman who wrote novels about girls who wanted to be loved for themselves alone, but she was not lacking in astuteness.

He finished his tea and muffins, and then, ordering the perambulator, had the son and heir decanted into it and started off for a saunter on Wimbledon Common. Many young fathers, I believe, shrink from this task, considering that it lowers their prestige, but Bingo had always enjoyed it.

To-day, however, the jaunt was robbed of all its pleasures by the brooding melancholy into which the sight of the child, lying there dumb and aloof with a thumb in its mouth, plunged him. Hitherto, he had always accepted with equanimity the fact that it was impossible for there to be any real exchange of ideas between his offspring and himself. An occasional gurgle from the former, and on his side a few musical chirrups, had served to keep them in touch. But now the thought that they were separated by an impassable gulf which no chirrups could bridge, seemed to him poignant and tragic to a degree.

Here, he reflected, was he—penniless; and there was the infant —rolling in the stuff; and absolutely no way of getting together and adjusting things. If only he could have got through to Algernon Aubrey the facts relating to his destitute condition, he was convinced that there would have been no difficulty about arranging a temporary loan. It was the old story of frozen assets, which, as everyone knows, is the devil of a business and stifles commerce at the source.

So preoccupied was he with these moody meditations that it was not immediately that he discovered that somebody was speaking his name. Then, looking up with a start, he saw that a stout man in a frock coat and a bowler hat had come alongside, wheeling a perambulator containing a blob-faced baby.

"Good evening, Mr. Little," he said, and Bingo saw that it was his bookie, Charles ("Charlie Always Pays") Pikelet, the man who had acted as party of the second part in the recent deal over the horse Gargoyle. Having seen him before only at race meetings —where, doubtless from the best of motives, he affected chessboard tweeds and a white panama—he had not immediately recognized him.

"Why, hullo, Mr. Pikelet," he said.

He was not really feeling in the vein for conversation and would have preferred to be alone with his thoughts, but the other appeared to be desirous of chatting, and he was prepared to stretch a point to oblige him. The prudent man always endeavours to keep in with bookies.

"I didn't know you lived in these parts. Is that your baby?"

"Ah," said Charles Pikelet, speaking despondently. He gave a quick look into the interior of the perambulator to which he was attached, and winced like one who has seen some fearful sight.

"Kitchy-kitchy," said Bingo.

"How do you mean, kitchy-kitchy?" asked Mr. Pikelet, puzzled.

"I was speaking to the baby," explained Bingo. "A pretty child," he added, feeling that there was nothing to be lost by giving the man the old oil.

Charles Pikelet looked up, amazement in his eyes.

"Pretty?"

"Well, of course," said Bingo, his native honesty compelling him to qualify the statement, "I don't say he—if it is a he—is a Robert Taylor or—if a she—a Carole Lombard. Pretty compared with mine, I mean."

Again Charles Pikelet appeared dumbfounded.

"Are you standing there and telling me this baby of mine isn't uglier than that baby of yours?" he cried incredulously.

It was Bingo's turn to be stunned.

"Are you standing there and telling me it is?"

"I certainly am. Why, yours looks human."

Bingo could scarcely believe his ears.

"Human? Mine?"

"Well, practically human."

"My poor misguided Pikelet, you're talking rot."

"Rot, eh?" said Charles Pikelet, stung. "Perhaps you'd care to have a bet on it? Five to one I'm offering that my little Arabella here stands alone as the ugliest baby in Wimbledon."

A sudden thrill shot through Bingo. No one has a keener eye than he for recognizing money for pickles.

"Take a tenner?"

"Tenner it is."

"Okay," said Bingo.

"Kayo," said Charles Pikelet. "Where's your tenner?"

This introduction of a rather sordid note into the discussion caused Bingo to start uneasily.

"Oh, dash it," he protested, "surely elasticity of credit is the very basis of these transactions. Chalk it up on the slate."

Mr. Pikelet said he hadn't got a slate.

Bingo had to think quickly. He had a tenner on his person, of course, but he realized that it was in the nature of trust money, and he had no means of conferring with Algernon Aubrey and ascertaining whether the child would wish to slip it to him. It might be that he had inherited his mother's lack of the sporting spirit.

And then, with quick revulsion, he felt that he was misjudging the little fellow. No son of his would want to pass up a snip like this.

"All right," he said. "Here you are."

He produced the note, and allowed it to crackle before Charles Pikelet's eyes.

"Right," said Charles Pikelet, satisfied. "Here's my fifty. And we'll put the decision up to the policeman that's coming along. Hey, officer."

"Gents?" said the policeman, halting. He was a large, comfortable man with an honest face. Bingo liked the look of him, and was well content to place the judging in his hands.

"Officer," said Charles Pikelet, "to settle a bet, is this baby here uglier than that baby there?"

"Or vice versa?" said Bingo.

The policeman brooded over the two perambulators.

"They're neither of 'em to be compared with the one I've got at home," he said, a little smugly. "There's a baby with a face that *would* stop a clock. And the missus thinks it's a beauty. I've had many a hearty laugh over that," said the policeman indulgently.

Both Charles Pikelet and Bingo felt that he was straying from the point.

"Never mind about your baby," said Charles Pikelet.

"No," said Bingo. "Stick closely to the *res*."

"Your baby isn't a runner," said Charles Pikelet. "Only the above have arrived."

Called to order, the policeman intensified his scrutiny. He looked from the one perambulator to the other, and then from the other perambulator to the one. And it suddenly came over Bingo

like a cold douche that this hesitation could mean only one thing. It was not going to be the absurdly simple walk-over which he had anticipated.

"H'm!" said the policeman.

"Ha!" said the policeman.

Bingo's heart stood still. It was now plain to him that there was to be a desperately close finish. But he tells me that he is convinced that his entry would have nosed home, had it not been for a bit of extraordinary bad luck in the straight. Just as the policeman stood vacillating, there peeped through the clouds a ray of sunshine. It fell on Arabella Pikelet's face, causing her to screw it up in a hideous grimace. And at the same instant, with the race neck and neck, she suddenly started blowing bubbles out of the corner of her mouth.

The policeman hesitated no longer. He took Miss Pikelet's hand and raised it.

"The winnah!" he said. "But you ought to see the one I've got at home."

If the muffins which Bingo had had for tea had turned to ashes in his mouth, it was as nothing compared with what happened to the chump chop and fried which he had for dinner. For by that time his numbed brain, throwing off the coma into which it had fallen, really got busy, pointing out to him the various angles of the frightful mess he had let himself into. It stripped the seven veils from the situation, and allowed him to see it in all its stark grimness.

Between Bingo and Mrs. Bingo there existed an almost perfect love. From the very inception of their union, they had been like ham and eggs. But he doubted whether the most Grade A affection could stand up against the revelation of what he had done this day. Look at his story from whatever angle you pleased, it remained one that reflected little credit on a young father and at the best must inevitably lead to "Oh, how could you's ?" And the whole wheeze in married life, he had come to learn, was to give the opposite number as few opportunities of saying "Oh, how could you ?" as possible.

And that story would have to be told. The first thing Mrs. Bingo would want to see on her return would be Algernon Aubrey's passbook, and from the statement that no such passbook existed to the final, stammering confession would be but a step. No wonder that as he sat musing in his chair after dinner the eyes

were haggard, the face drawn and the limbs inclined to twitch.

He was just jotting down on the back of an envelope a few rough notes such as "Pocket picked," and "Took the bally thing out of my pocket on a windy morning and it blew out of my hand," and speculating on the chances of these getting by, when he was called to the telephone to take a trunk call and found Mrs. Bingo on the other end of the wire.

"Hullo," said Mrs. Bingo.

"Hullo," said Bingo.

"Oh, hullo, darling."

"Hullo, precious."

"Hullo, sweetie-pie."

"Hullo, angel."

"Are you there?" said Mrs. Bingo. "How's Algy?"

"Oh, fine."

"As beautifully as ever?"

"Substantially, yes."

"Have you got my letter?"

"Yes."

"And the ten pounds?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it's a wonderful idea?"

"Terrific."

"I suppose it was too late to go to the bank to-day?"

"Yes."

"Well, go there to-morrow morning before you come to Paddington."

"Paddington?"

"Yes. To meet me. We're coming home to-morrow. Mother swallowed some brine this morning, and thinks she'd rather go and take the mud baths at Pistany instead."

At any moment less tense than the present one, the thought of Mrs. Bingo's mother being as far away as Pistany would have been enough to cause Bingo's spirits to soar. But now the news hardly made an impression on him. All he could think of was that the morrow would see Mrs. Bingo in his midst. And then the bitter reckoning.

"The train gets to Paddington about twelve. Mind you're there."

"I'll be there."

"And bring Algy."

"Right-ho."

"Oh, and Bingo. Most important. You know my desk?"

"Desk. Yes."

"Look in the middle top drawer."

"Middle top drawer. Right."

"I left the proofs of my Christmas story for *Woman's Wonder* there, and I've had a very sniffy telegram saying that they must have them to-morrow morning. So will you be an angel and correct them and send them off by to-night's post without fail? You can't miss them. Middle top drawer of my desk, and the title is 'Tiny Fingers'. And now I must go back to Mother. She's still coughing. Good-bye, darling."

"Good-bye, precious."

"Good-bye, lambkin."

"Good-bye, my dream rabbit."

Bingo hung up the receiver, and made his way to the study. He found the proofs of "Tiny Fingers", and taking pencil in hand seated himself at the desk and started in on them.

His heart was heavier than ever. Normally, the news that his mother-in-law had been swallowing brine and was still coughing would have brought a sparkle to his eyes and a happy smile to his lips, but now it left him cold. He was thinking of the conversation which had just concluded and remembering how cordial Mrs. Bingo's voice had been, how cheery, how loving—so absolutely in all respects the voice of a woman who thinks her husband a king among men. How different from the flat, metallic voice which was going to say "*What!*" to him in the near future.

And then suddenly, as he brooded over the galley slips, a sharp thrill permeated his frame and he sat up in his chair as if a new, firm backbone had been inserted in place of the couple of feet of spaghetti he had been getting along with up till now. In the middle of slip two the story had started to develop, and the way in which it developed caused hope to dawn again.

I don't know if any of you are readers of Mrs. Bingo's output. If not, I may inform you that she goes in pretty wholeheartedly for the fruitily sentimental. This is so even at ordinary times, and for a Christmas number, of course, she naturally makes a special effort. In "Tiny Fingers" she had chucked off the wraps completely. Scooping up snow and holly and robin redbreasts and carol-singing villagers in both hands, she had let herself go and given her public the works.

Bingo, when I last saw him, told me the plot of "Tiny Fingers" in pitiless detail, but all I need touch on now is its main theme. It was about a hard-hearted godfather who had given his god-daughter the air for marrying the young artist, and they came right back at him by shoving the baby under his nose on Christmas Eve—the big scene, of course, being the final one, where the old buster sits in his panelled library, steadying the child on his knee with one hand while writing a whacking big cheque with the other. And the reason it made so deep an impression on Bingo was that he had suddenly remembered that Oofy Prosser was Algernon Aubrey's godfather. And what he was asking himself was, if this ringing-in-the-baby wheeze had worked with Sir Aylmer Mauleverer, the hardest nut in the old-world village of Meadowvale, why shouldn't it work with Oofy?

It was true that the two cases were not exactly parallel, Sir Aylmer having had snow and robin redbreasts to contend against and it now being the middle of June. It was true, also, that Oofy, when guardedly consenting to hold the towel for Algernon Aubrey, had expressly stipulated that there must be no funny business and that a small silver mug was to be accepted in full settlement. Nevertheless, Bingo went to bed in optimistic mood. Indeed, his last thought before dropping off to sleep was a speculation as to whether, if the baby played its cards right, it might not be possible to work Oofy up into three figures.

He had come down a bit in his budget, of course, by the time he set out for Park Lane next morning. One always does after sleeping on these things. As he saw it now, twenty quid was about what it ought to pan out at. This, however, cut fifty-fifty between principal and manager, would be ample. He was no hog. All he wanted was to place child and self on a sound financial footing, and as he reached Oofy's flat and pressed the bell, he was convinced that the thing was in the bag.

In a less sanguine frame of mind, he might have been discouraged by the fact that the infant was looking more than ever like some mass-assassin who has been blackballed by the Devil's Island Social and Outing Club as unfit to associate with the members; but his experience with Charles Pikelet and the policeman had shown him that this was how all babies of that age looked, and he had no reason to suppose that the one in "Tiny Fingers" had been any different. The only thing Mrs. Bingo had

stressed about the latter had been its pink toes, and no doubt Algernon Aubrey, if called upon to do so, could swing as pink a toe as the next child. It was with bright exuberance that he addressed Oofy's man, Corker, as he opened the door.

"Oh, hullo, Corker. Lovely morning. Mr. Prosser in?"

Corker did not reply immediately. The sight of Algernon Aubrey seemed momentarily to have wiped speech from his lips. Perfectly trained valet though he was, he had started back on perceiving him, his arms raised in a rudimentary posture on self-defence.

"Yes, sir," he replied at length. "Mr. Prosser is at home. But he is not up yet, sir. He was out late last night."

Bingo nodded intelligently. Oofy's practice of going out on the tiles and returning with the morning milk was familiar to him.

"Ah, well," he said tolerantly. "Young blood, Corker, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's a poor heart that never rejoices."

"So I have been informed, sir."

"I'll just pop in and pip-pip."

"Very good, sir. Shall I take your luggage?"

"Eh? Oh, no, thanks. This is Mr. Prosser's godson. I want them to meet. This'll be the first time he's seen him."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Rather make his day, what?"

"So I should be disposed to imagine, sir. If you will follow me, sir. Mr. Prosser is in the sitting-room."

"In the sitting-room? I thought you said he was in bed."

"No, sir. On his return home this morning, Mr. Prosser appears to have decided not to go to bed. You will find him in the fireplace."

And so it proved. Oofy Prosser was lying with his head in the fender and his mouth open. He had on an opera hat and what would have been faultless evening dress if he had had a tie on instead of a blue ribbon of the sort which the delicately nurtured use to bind up their hair. In one hand he was clutching a pink balloon, and across his shirt front was written in lipstick the word "Whoops." His whole aspect was so plainly that of a man whom it would be unwise to stir that Bingo, chewing a thoughtful lip, stood pondering on what was the best policy to pursue.

It was a glance at his watch that decided him. He saw that he had been running rather behind schedule, and that if he was to

meet Mrs. Bingo at Paddington at twelve-five he would have to be starting at once.

"This, Corker," he said to Corker, "has made things a bit complex, Corker. I've got to be at Paddington in ten minutes, and everything seems to point to the fact that Mr. Prosser, if roused abruptly, may wake up cross. Better, I think, to let him have his sleep out. So here is the procedure, as I see it. I will leave this baby on the floor beside him, so that they can get together in due course, and I will look in and collect it on my way back."

"Very good, sir."

"Now, Mr. Prosser's first move, on waking and finding the place crawling with issue, will no doubt be to ring for you and ask what it's all about. You will then say: 'This is your godson, sir.' You couldn't manage 'itsy-bitsy godson', could you?"

"No, sir."

"I was afraid not. Still, you've got the idea of the thing? Good. Fine. Right-ho."

The train from Droitwich was rolling in just as Bingo came on to the platform, and a moment later he spotted Mrs. Bingo getting out. She was supporting her mother, who still seemed rocky on the pins, but on seeing him she detached herself from the old geezer, allowing her to navigate temporarily under her own steam, and flung herself into his arms.

"Bingo, darling!"

"Rosie, my pre-eminent old egg!"

"Well, it is nice being back with you again. I feel as if I had been away years. Where's Algy?"

"I left him at Oofy Prosser's. His godfather, you know. I had a minute or two to spare on my way here, so I looked in on Oofy. He was all over the child and just wouldn't let him go. So I arranged that I would call in for him on my way back."

"I see. Then I had better meet you there after I've taken Mother to her flat. She's not at all well."

"No, I noticed she seemed to be looking a bit down among the wines and spirits," said Bingo, casting a gratified glance at the old object, who was now propping herself up against a passing porter. "The sooner you get her off to the mud baths, the better. All right, then. See you at Oofy's."

"Where does he live?"

"Bloxham Mansions, Park Lane."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Oh, Bingo, darling, did you deposit that money for Algy?"

Bingo struck his forehead.

"Well, I'm dashed! In the excitement of meeting you, my dream of joy, I clean forgot. We'll do it together after leaving Oofy."

Brave words, of course, but as he hiked back to Bloxham Mansions there suddenly came on him for the first time an unnerving feeling of doubt as to whether he was justified in taking it for granted that Oofy would come across. At the moment when he had conceived the scheme of using Algernon Aubrey as a softening influence, he had felt that it was a cinch. It had taken only about five minutes of his godson's society to bring the milk of human kindness sloshing out of Sir Aylmer Mauleverer in bucketfuls, and he had supposed that the same thing would happen with Oofy. But now there began to burgeon within him a chilling uncertainty, which became intensified with every step he took.

It had only just occurred to him that Algernon Aubrey was up against a much stiffer proposition than the child in "Tiny Fingers". Sir Aylmer Mauleverer had been a healthy, outdoor man, the sort that springs from bed and makes a hearty breakfast. There had been no suggestion, as far as he could remember, of him having a morning head. Oofy on the other hand, it was only too abundantly evident, was going to have, when he awoke to face a new day, a morning head of the first water. Everything, he realized, turned on how that head would affect a godfather's outlook.

It was with tense anxiety that he demanded hot news from Corker as the door opened.

"Any developments, Corker?"

"Well, yes and no, sir."

"How do you mean, yes and no? Has Mr. Prosser rung?"

"No, sir."

"Then he's still asleep?"

"No, sir."

"But you said he hadn't rung."

"No, sir. But a moment ago I heard him utter a cry."

"A cry?"

"Yes, sir. A piercing cry, indicative of considerable distress of mind. It was in many respects similar to his ejaculation on the

morning of January the first of the present year, on the occasion when he supposed—mistakenly—that he had seen a pink elephant."

Bingo frowned.

"I don't like that."

"Nor did Mr. Prosser, sir."

"I mean, I don't like the way things seem to have been shaping. You're a man of the world, Corker. You know as well as I do that godfathers don't utter piercing cries on meeting their godsons, unless there is something seriously amiss. I think I'll step along and take a dekko."

He did so, and, entering the sitting-room and noting contents, halted with raised eyebrows.

Algernon Aubrey was seated on the floor, his attention riveted on the balloon which he appeared to be trying to swallow. Oofy Prosser was standing on the mantelpiece, gazing down with bulging eyes. Bingo is a pretty shrewd sort of chap, and it didn't take him long to see that there was a sense of strain in the atmosphere. He thought the tactful thing to do was to pass it off as if one hadn't noticed anything.

"Hullo, Oofy," he said.

"Hullo, Bingo," said Oofy.

"Nice morning," said Bingo.

"Wonderful weather we're having," said Oofy.

They chatted for a while about the prospects for Hurst Park and the latest mid-European political developments, and then there was a pause. It was Oofy who eventually broke it.

"Tell me, Bingo," he said, speaking with a rather overdone carelessness, "I wonder if by any chance you can see anything on the floor, just over there by the fireplace. I dare say it's only my imagination, but it seems to me——"

"Do you mean the baby?"

Oofy gave a long sort of whistling gasp.

"It *is* a baby? I mean, you can see it, too?"

"Oh, rather. With the naked eye," said Bingo. "Pipsy-wipsy," he added, lugging the child into the conversation so that it wouldn't feel out of it. "Dada can see you."

Oofy started.

"Did you say 'dada'?"

" 'Dada' was the word."

"Is this your baby?"

"That's right."

"The little blighter I gave that silver mug to?"

"None other."

"What's he doing here?"

"Oh, just paying a social call."

"Well," said Oofy, in an aggrieved voice, starting to climb down, "if he had had the sense to explain that at the outset, I would have been spared a terrible experience. I came in a bit late last night and sank into a refreshing sleep on the floor, and I woke to find a frightful face glaring into mine. Naturally, I thought the strain had been too much and that I was seeing things."

"Would you care to kiss your godson?"

Oofy shuddered strongly.

"Don't say such things, even in fun," he begged.

He reached the floor, and stood staring at Algernon Aubrey from a safe distance.

"And to think," he murmured, "that I thought of getting married!"

"Marriage is all right," argued Bingo.

"True," Oofy conceded, "up to a certain point. But the risk! The fearful risk! You relax your vigilance for a second, you turn your head for a single instant, and bing! something like that happens."

"Popsy-wopsy," said Bingo.

"It's no good saying 'popsy-wopsy'—it's appalling. Bingo," said Oofy, speaking in a low, trembling voice, "do you realize that, but for your muscling in on that lunch of mine, this might have happened to me? Yes," he went on, paling beneath his pimples, "I assure you. I was definitely planning to propose to that girl over the coffee and cigarettes. And you came along and saved me." He drew a deep breath. "Bingo, old chap, don't I seem to recall hearing you ask me for a fiver or something?"

"A tenner."

Ooft shook his head.

"It's not enough," he said. "Would you mind if I made it fifty?"

"Not a bit."

"You've no objection?"

"None whatever, old man."

"Good," said Oofy.

"Fine," said Bingo.

"Excuse me, sir," said Corker, appearing in the doorway, "the hall porter has rung up to say that Mrs. Little is waiting for Mr. Little downstairs."

"Tell her I'll be there in two ticks, with bells on," said Bingo.

5

Anselm Gets His Chance

THE Summer Sunday was drawing to a close. Twilight had fallen on the little garden of the Angler's Rest, and the air was fragrant with the sweet scent of jasmine and tobacco plant. Stars were peeping out. Blackbirds sang drowsily in the shrubberies. Bats wheeled through the shadows, and a gentle breeze played fitfully among the hollyhocks. It was, in short, as a customer who had looked in for a gin and tonic rather happily put it, a nice evening.

Nevertheless, to Mr. Mulliner and the group assembled in the bar parlour of the inn there was a sense of something missing. It was due to the fact that Miss Postlethwaite, the efficient barmaid, was absent. Some forty minutes had elapsed before she arrived and took over from the pot-boy. When she did so, the quiet splendour of her costume and the devout manner in which she pulled the beer-handle told their own story.

"You've been to church," said a penetrating Sherry and Angostura.

Miss Postlethwaite said Yes, she had, and it had been lovely.

"Beautiful in every sense of the word," said Miss Postlethwaite, filling an order for a pint of bitter. "I do adore evening service in the summer. It sort of does something to you, what I mean. All that stilly hush and what not."

"The vicar preached the sermon, I suppose?" said Mr. Mulliner.

"Yes," said Miss Postlethwaite, adding that it had been extremely moving.

Mr. Mulliner took a thoughtful sip of his hot Scotch and lemon.

"The old old story," he said, a touch of sadness in his voice. "I do not know if you gentlemen are aware of it, but in the rural districts of England vicars always preach the evening sermon during the summer months, and this causes a great deal of discontent to seethe among curates. It exasperates the young fellows, and one can understand their feelings. As Miss Postlethwaite rightly

says, there is something about the atmosphere of evensong in a village church that induces a receptive frame of mind in a congregation, and a preacher, preaching under such conditions, can scarcely fail to grip and stir. The curates, withheld from so preaching, naturally feel that they are being ground beneath the heel of an iron monopoly and chiselled out of their big chance."

A Whisky and Splash said he had never thought of that.

"In that respect," said Mr. Mulliner, "you differ from my cousin Rupert's younger son, Anselm. He thought of it a great deal. He was the curate of the parish of Rising Mattock in Hampshire, and when he was not dreaming fondly of Myrtle Jellaby, niece of Sir Leopold Jellaby, O.B.E., the local squire, you would generally find him chafing at his vicar's high-handed selfishness in always hogging the evening sermon from late in. April till well on in September. He told me once that it made him feel like a caged skylark."

"Why did he dream fondly of Myrtle Jellaby?" asked a Stout and Mild, who was not very quick at the uptake.

"Because he loved her. And she loved him. She had, indeed, consented to become his wife."

"They were engaged?" said the Stout and Mild, beginning to get it.

"Secretly. Anselm did not dare to inform her uncle of the position of affairs, because all he had to marry on was his meagre stipend. He feared the wrath of that millionaire philatelist."

"Millionaire what?" asked a Small Bass.

"Sir Leopold," explained Mr. Mulliner, "collected stamps."

The Small Bass said that he had always thought that a philatelist was a man who was kind to animals.

"No," said Mr. Mulliner, "a stamp collector. Though many philatelists are, I believe, also kind to animals. Sir Leopold Jellaby had been devoted to this hobby for many years, ever since he had retired from business as a promoter of companies in the City of London. His collection was famous."

"And Anselm didn't like to tell him about Myrtle," said the Stout and Mild.

"No. As I say, he lacked the courage. He pursued instead the cautious policy of lying low and hoping for the best. And one bright summer day the happy ending seemed to have arrived. Myrtle, calling at the vicarage at breakfast-time, found Anselm dancing round the table, in one hand a half-consumed piece of

toast, in the other a letter, and learned from him that under the will of his late godfather, the recently deceased Mr. J. G. Beenstock, he had benefited by an unexpected legacy—to wit, the stout stamp album which now lay beside the marmalade dish.

The information caused the girl's face to light up (continued Mr. Mulliner). A philatelist's niece, she knew how valuable these things could be.

"What's it worth?" she asked eagerly.

"It is insured, I understand, for no less a sum than five thousand pounds."

"Golly!"

"Golly, indeed," assented Anselm.

"Nice sugar!" said Myrtle.

"Exceedingly nice," agreed Anselm.

"You must take care of it. Don't leave it lying about. We don't want somebody pinching it."

A look of pain passed over Anselm's spiritual face.

"You are not suggesting that the vicar would stoop to such an act?"

"I was thinking more," said Myrtle, "of Joe Beamish."

She was alluding to a member of her loved one's little flock who had at one time been a fairly prosperous burglar. Seeing the light after about sixteen prison sentences, he had given up his life-work and now raised vegetables and sang in the choir.

"Old Joe is supposed to have reformed and got away from it all, but, if you ask me, there's a lot of life in the old dog yet. If he gets to hear that there's a five-thousand-pound stamp collection lying around . . ."

"I think you wrong our worthy Joe, darling. However, I will take precautions. I shall place the album in a drawer in the desk in the vicar's study. It is provided with a stout lock. But before doing so, I thought I might take it round and show it to your uncle. It is possible that he may feel disposed to make an offer for the collection."

"That's a thought," agreed Myrtle. "Soak him good."

"I will assuredly omit no effort to that end," said Anselm.

And, kissing Myrtle fondly, he went about his parochial duties

It was towards evening that he called upon Sir Leopold, and the kindly old squire, learning the nature of his errand and realizing that he had not come to make a touch on behalf of the Church

Organ Fund, lost the rather strained look which he had worn when his name was announced and greeted him warmly.

"Stamps?" he said. "Yes, I am always ready to add to my collection, provided that what I am offered is of value and the price reasonable. Had you any figure in mind for these of yours, my dear Mulliner?"

Anselm said that he had been thinking of something in the neighbourhood of five thousand pounds, and Sir Leopold shook from stem to stern like a cat that has received half a brick in the short ribs. All his life the suggestion that he should part with large sums of money had shocked him.

"Oh?" he said. Then, seeming to master himself with a strong effort. "Well, let me look at them."

Ten minutes later, he had closed the volume and was eyeing Anselm compassionately.

"I am afraid you must be prepared for bad news, my boy," he said.

A sickening feeling of apprehension gripped Anselm.

"You don't mean they are not valuable?"

Sir Leopold put the tips of his fingers together and leaned back in his chair in the rather pontifical manner which he had been accustomed to assume in the old days when addressing meetings of shareholders.

"The term 'valuable,' my dear fellow, is a relative one. To some people five pounds would be a large sum."

"Five pounds!"

"That is what I am prepared to offer. Or, seeing that you are a personal friend, shall we say ten?"

"But they are insured for five thousand."

Sir Leopold shook his head with a half-smile.

"My dear Mulliner, if you knew as much as I do about the vanity of stamp collectors, you would not set great store by that. Well, as I say, I don't mind giving you ten pounds for the lot. Think it over and let me know."

On leaden feet Anselm left the room. His hopes were shattered. He felt like a man who, chasing rainbows, has had one of them suddenly turn and bite him in the leg.

"Well?" said Myrtle, who had been awaiting the result of the conference in the passage.

Anselm broke the sad news. The girl was astounded.

"But you told me the thing was insured for——"

Anselm sighed.

"Your uncle appeared to attribute little or no importance to that. It seems that stamp collectors are in the habit of insuring their collections for fantastic sums, out of a spirit of vanity. I intend," said Anselm broodingly, "to preach a very strong sermon shortly on the subject of Vanity."

There was a silence.

"Ah, well," said Anselm, "these things are no doubt sent to try us. It is by accepting such blows in a meek and chastened spirit . . ."

"Meek and chastened spirit my left eyeball," cried Myrtle, who, like so many girls to-day, was apt to be unguarded in her speech. "We've got to do something about this."

"But what? I am not denying," said Anselm, "that the shock has been a severe one, and I regret to confess that there was a moment when I was sorely tempted to utter one or two of the observations which I once heard the coach of my college boat at Oxford make to Number Five when he persisted in obtruding his abdomen as he swung his oar. It would have been wrong, but it would unquestionably have relieved my . . ."

"I know!" cried Myrtle. "Joe Beamish!"

Anselm stared at her.

"Joe Beamish? I do not understand you, dear."

"Use your bean, boy, use your bean. You remember what I told you. All we've got to do is let old Joe know where those stamps are, and he will take over from there. And there we shall be with our nice little claim for five thousand of the best on the insurance company."

"Myrtle!"

"It would be money for jam," the enthusiastic girl continued. "Just so much velvet. Go and see Joe at once."

"Myrtle! I beg you, desist. You shock me inexpressibly."

She gazed at him incredulously. "You mean you won't do it?"

"I could not even contemplate such a course."

"You won't unleash old Joe and set him acting for the best?"

"Certainly not. Most decidedly not. A thousand times, no."

"But what's wrong with the idea?"

"The whole project is ethically unsound."

There was a pause. For a moment it seemed as if the girl was about to express her chagrin in an angry outburst. A frown darkened her brow, and she kicked petulantly at a passing beetle.

Then she appeared to get the better of her emotion. Her face cleared, and she smile at him tenderly, like a mother at her fractious child.

"Oh, all right. Just as you say. Where are you off to now?"

"I have a Mothers' Meeting at six."

"And I," said Myrtle, "have got to take a few pints of soup to the deserving poor. I'd better set about it. Amazing the way these bimbos absorb soup. Like sponges."

They walked together as far as the Village Hall. Anselm went in to meet the Mothers. Myrtle, as soon as he was out of sight, turned and made her way to Joe Beamish's cosy cottage. The crooning of a hymn from within showing that its owner was at home, she walked through its honeysuckle-covered porch.

"Well, Joe, old top," she said, "how's everything?"

Joe Beamish was knitting a sock in the tiny living-room which smelled in equal proportions of mice, ex-burglars and shag tobacco, and Myrtle, as her gaze fell upon his rugged features, felt her heart leap within her like that of the poet Wordsworth when beholding a rainbow in the sky. His altered circumstances had not changed the erstwhile porch-climber's outward appearance. It remained that of one of those men for whom the police are always spreading drag-nets; and Myrtle, eyeing him, had the feeling that in supposing that in this pre-eminent plugugly there still lurked something of the Old Adam, she had called her shots correctly.

For some minutes after her entry, the conversation was confined to neutral topics—the weather, the sock and the mice behind the wainscoting. It was only when it turned to the decorations of the church for the forthcoming Harvest Festival—to which, she learned, her host would be in a position to contribute two cabbages and a pumpkin—that Myrtle saw her opportunity of approaching a more intimate subject.

"Mr. Mulliner will be pleased about that," she said. "He's nuts on the Harvest Festival."

"R," said Joe Beamish. "He's a good man, Mr. Mulliner."

"He's a lucky man," said Myrtle. "Have you heard what's just happened to him? Some sort of deceased Beenstock has gone and left him five thousand quid."

"Coo! Is that right?"

"Well, it comes to the same thing. An album of stamps that's worth five thousand. You know how valuable stamps are. Why,

my uncle's collection is worth ten times that. That's why we've got all those burglar alarms up at the Hall."

A rather twisted expression came into Joe Beamish's face.

"I've heard there's a lot of burglar alarms up at the Hall," he said.

"But there aren't any at the vicarage, and, between you and me, Joe, it's worrying me rather. Because, you see, that's where Mr. Mulliner is keeping his stamps."

"R," said Joe Beamish, speaking now with a thoughtful intonation.

"I told him he ought to keep them at his bank."

Joe Beamish started.

"Wot ever did you go and say a silly thing like that for?" he asked.

"It wasn't at all silly," said Myrtle warmly. "It was just ordinary common sense. I don't consider those stamps are safe, left lying in a drawer in the desk in the vicar's study, that little room on the ground floor to the right of the front door with its flimsy French windows that could so easily be forced with a chisel or something. They are locked up, of course, but what good are locks? I've seen these, and anybody could open them with a hairpin. I tell you, Joe, I'm worried."

Joe Beamish bent over his sock, knitting and purling for a while in silence. When he spoke again, it was to talk of pumpkins and cabbages, and after that, for he was a man of limited ideas, of cabbages and pumpkins.

Anselm Mulliner, meanwhile, was passing through a day of no little spiritual anguish. At the moment when it had been made, Myrtle's proposal had shaken him to his foundations. He had not felt so utterly unmanned since the evening when he had been giving young Willie Purvis a boxing lesson at the Lads' Club, and Willie, by a happy accident, had got home squarely on the button.

This revelation of the character of the girl to whom he had given a curate's unspotted heart had stunned him. Myrtle, it seemed to him, appeared to have no notion whatsoever of the distinction between right and wrong. And while this would not have mattered, of course, had he been a gun-man and she his prospective moll, it made a great deal of difference to one who hoped later on to become a vicar and, in such event, would want his wife to look after the parish funds. He wondered what the

prophet Isaiah would have had to say about it, had he been informed of her views on strategy and tactics.

All through the afternoon and evening he continued to brood on the thing. At supper that night he was distrait and preoccupied. Busy with his own reflections, he scarcely listened to the conversation of the Rev. Sidney Gooch, his vicar. And this was perhaps fortunate, for it was a Saturday and the vicar, as was his custom at Saturday suppers, harped a good deal on the subject of the sermon which he was proposing to deliver at evensong on the morrow. He said, not once but many times, that he confidently expected, if the fine weather held up, to knock his little flock cockeyed. The Rev. Sidney was a fine, upstanding specimen of the muscular Christian, but somewhat deficient in tact.

Towards nightfall, however, Anselm found a kindlier, mellower note creeping into his meditations. Possibly it was the excellent round of beef of which he had partaken, and the wholesome ale with which he had washed it down, that caused this softer mood. As he smoked his after-supper cigarette, he found himself beginning to relax in his austere attitude towards Myrtle's feminine weakness. He reminded himself that it must be placed to her credit that she had not been obdurate. On the contrary, the moment he had made plain his disapproval of her financial methods, conscience had awakened, her better self had prevailed and she had abandoned her dubious schemes. That was much.

Happy once more, he went to bed and, after dipping into a good book for half an hour, switched off the light and fell into a restful sleep.

But it seemed to him that he had scarcely done so when he was awakened by loud noises. He sat up, listening. Something in the nature of a free-for-all appeared to be in progress in the lower part of the house. His knowledge of the vicarage's topography suggested to him that the noises were proceeding from the study and, hastily donning a dressing-gown, he made his way thither.

The room was in darkness, but he found the switch and, turning on the light, perceived that the odd, groaning sound which had greeted him as he approached the door proceeded from the Rev. Sidney Gooch. The vicar was sitting on the floor, a hand pressed to his left eye.

"A burglar!" he said, rising. "A beastly bounder of a burglar."

"He has injured you, I fear," said Anselm commiseratingly.

"Of course he has injured me," said the Rev. Sidney, with some testiness. "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Proverbs, six, twenty-seven. I heard a sound and came down and seized the fellow, and he struck me so violently that I was compelled to loosen my grip, and he made his escape through the window. Be so kind, Mulliner, as to look about and see if he has taken anything. There were some manuscript sermons which I should not care to lose."

Anselm was standing beside the desk. He had to pause for a moment in order to control his voice.

"The only object that appears to have been removed," he said, "is an album of stamps belonging to myself."

"The sermons are there?"

"Still there."

"Bitter," said the vicar. "Bitter."

"I beg your pardon?" said Anselm.

He turned. His superior of the cloth was standing before the mirror, regarding himself in it with a rueful stare.

"Bitter!" he repeated. "I was thinking," he explained, "of the one I had planned to deliver at evensong to-morrow. A pippin, Mulliner, in the deepest and truest sense a pippin. I am not exaggerating when I saw that I would have had them tearing up the pews. And now that dream is ended. I cannot possibly appear in the pulpit with a shiner like this. It would put wrong ideas into the heads of the congregation—always, in these rural communities, so prone to place the worst construction on such disfigurements. To-morrow, Mulliner, I shall be confined to my bed with a slight chill, and you will conduct both matins and evensong. Bitter!" said the Rev. Sidney Gooch. "Bitter!"

Anselm did not speak. His heart was too full for words.

In Anselm's deportment and behaviour on the following morning there was nothing to indicate that his soul was a maelstrom of seething emotions. Most curates who find themselves unexpectedly allowed to preach on Sunday evening in the summer time are like dogs let off the chain. They leap. They bound. They sing snatches of the more rollicking psalms. They rush about saying "Good morning, good morning," to everybody and patting children on the head. Not so Anselm. He knew that only by conserving his nervous energies would he be able to give of his best when the great moment came.

To those of the congregation who were still awake in the later stages of the service his sermon at Matins seemed dull and colourless. And so it was. He had no intention of frittering away eloquence on a morning sermon. He deliberately held himself back, concentrating every fibre of his being on the address which he was to deliver in the evening.

He had had it by him for months. Every curate throughout the English countryside keeps tucked away among his effects a special sermon designed to prevent him being caught short, if suddenly called upon to preach at evensong. And all through the afternoon he remained closeted in his room, working upon it. He pruned. He polished. He searched the Thesaurus for the telling adjective. By the time the church bells began to ring out over the fields and spinneys of Rising Mattock in the quiet gloaming, his masterpiece was perfected to the last comma.

Feeling more like a volcano than a curate, Anselm Mulliner pinned together the sheets of manuscript and set forth.

The conditions could not have been happier. By the end of the pre-sermon hymn the twilight was far advanced, and through the door of the little church there poured the scent of trees and flowers. All was still, save for the distant tinkling of sheep bells and the drowsy calling of rooks among the elms. With quiet confidence Anselm mounted the pulpit steps. He had been sucking throat pastilles all day and saying "Mi-mi" to himself in an under tone throughout the service, and he knew that he would be in good voice.

For an instant he paused and gazed about him. He was rejoiced to see that he was playing to absolute capacity. Every pew was full. There, in the squire's high-backed stall, was Sir Leopold Jellaby, O.B.E., with Myrtle at his side. There, among the choir, looking indescribably foul in a surplice, sat Joe Beamish. There, in their respective places, were the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker and all the others who made up the personnel of the congregation. With a little sigh of rapture, Anselm cleared his throat and gave out the simple text of Brotherly Love.

I have been privileged (said Mr. Mulliner) to read the script of this sermon of Anselm's, and it must, I can see, have been extremely powerful. Even in manuscript form, without the added attraction of the young man's beautifully modulated tenor voice, one can clearly sense its magic.

Beginning with a thoughtful excursus on Brotherly Love among the Hivites and Hittites, it came down through the Early Britons, the Middle Ages and the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth to these modern times of ours, and it was here that Anselm Mulliner really let himself go. It was at this point, if one may employ the phrase, that he—in the best and most reverent spirit of the words—reached for the accelerator and stepped on it.

Earnestly, in accents throbbing with emotion, he spoke of our duty to one another; of the task that lies clear before all of us to make this a better and a sweeter world for our fellows; of the joy that waits those who give no thought to self but strain every nerve to do the square thing by one and all. And with each golden phrase he held his audience in an ever-tightening grip. Tradesmen who had been nodding somnolently woke up and sat with parted lips. Women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs. Choir-boys who had been sucking acid drops swallowed them remorsefully and stopped shuffling their feet.

Even at a morning service, such a sermon would have been a smash hit. Delivered in the gloaming, with all its adventitious aids to success, it was a riot.

It was not immediately after the conclusion of the proceedings that Anselm was able to tear himself away from the crowd of admirers that surged round him in the vestry. There were churchwardens who wanted to shake his hand, other churchwardens who insisted on smacking him on the back. One even asked for his autograph. But eventually he laughingly shook himself free and made his way back to the vicarage. And scarcely had he passed through the garden gate when something shot out at him from the scented darkness, and he found Myrtle Jellaby in his arms.

"Anselm!" she cried. "My wonder-man! However did you do it? I never heard such a sermon in my life!"

"It got across, I think?" said Anselm modestly.

"It was terrific. Golly! When you admonish a congregation, it stays admonished. How you think of all these things beats me."

"Oh, they come to one."

"And another thing I can't understand is how you came to be preaching at all in the evening. I thought you told me the vicar always did."

"The vicar," began Anselm, "has met with a slight . . ."

And then it suddenly occurred to him that in the excitement of

being allowed to preach at evensong he had quite forgotten to inform Myrtle of that other important happening, the theft of the stamp album.

"A rather extraordinary thing occurred last night, darling," he said. "The vicarage was burgled."

Myrtle was amazed.

"Not really?"

"Yes. A marauder broke in through the study window."

"Well, fancy that! Did he take anything?"

"He took my collection of stamps."

Myrtle uttered a cry of ecstasy.

"Then we collect!"

Anselm did not speak for a moment.

"I wonder."

"What do you mean, you wonder? Of course we collect. Shoot the claim in to the insurance people without a moment's delay."

"But have you reflected, dearest? Am I justified in doing as you suggest?"

"Of course. Why ever not?"

"It seems to me a moot point. The collection, we know, is worthless. Can I justly demand of this firm—The London and Midland Counties Aid and Benefit Association is its name—that they pay me five thousand pounds for an album of stamps that is without value?"

"Of course you can. Old Beenstock paid the premiums, didn't he?"

"That is true. Yes, I had forgotten that."

"It doesn't matter whether a thing's valuable or not. The point is what you insure it for. And it isn't as if it's going to hurt these Mutual Aid and Benefit birds to brass up. It's sinful the amount of money those insurance companies have. Must be jolly bad for them, if you ask me."

Anselm had not thought of that. Examining the point now, it seemed to him that Myrtle, with her woman's intuition, had rather gone to the root of the matter and touched the spot.

Was there not, he asked himself, a great deal to be said for this theory of hers that insurance companies had much too much money and would be better, finer, more spiritual insurance companies if somebody came along occasionally and took a bit of the stuff off them? Unquestionably there was. His doubts were removed. He saw now that it was not only a pleasure, but a duty,

to nick the London and Midland Counties Mutual Aid and Benefit Association for five thousand. It might prove the turning-point in the lives of its Board of Directors.

"Very well," he said. "I will send in the claim."

"At-a-boy! And the instant we touch, we'll get married."

"Myrtle!"

"Anselm!"

"Guv'nor," said the voice of Joe Beamish at their side, "could I 'ave a word with you?"

They drew apart with a start, and stared dumbly at the man.

"Guv'nor," said Joe Beamish, and it was plain from the thickness of his utterance that he was in the grip of some strong emotion, "I want to thank you, guv'nor, for that there sermon of yours. That there wonderful sermon."

Anselm smiled. He had recovered from the shock of hearing this sudden voice in the night. It was a nuisance, of course, to be interrupted like this at such a moment, but one must, he felt, be courteous to the fans. No doubt he would have to expect a lot of this sort of thing from now on.

"I am rejoiced that my poor effort should have elicited so striking an encomium."

"Wot say?"

"He says he's glad you liked it," said Myrtle, a little irritably, for she was not feeling her most amiable. A young girl who is nestling in the arms of the man she loves resents having cracksmen popping up through traps at her elbow.

"R," said Joe Beamish, enlightened. "Yes, guv'nor, that was a sermon, that was. That was what I call a blinking sermon."

"Thank you, Joe, thank you. It is nice to feel that you were pleased."

"You're right, I was pleased, guv'nor. I've 'eard sermons in Pentonville, and I've 'eard sermons in Wormwood Scrubs, and I've 'eard sermons in Dartmoor, and very good sermons they were, but of all the sermons I've 'eard I never 'eard a sermon that could touch this 'ere sermon for class and pep and . . ."

"Joe," said Myrtle.

"Yes, lady?"

"Scram!"

"Pardon, lady?"

"Get out. Pop off. Buzz along. Can't you see you're not wanted? We're busy."

"My dear," said Anselm, with gentle reproach, "is not your manner a little peremptory? I would not have the honest fellow feel . . ."

"R," interrupted Joe Beamish, and there was a suggestion of unshed tears in his voice, "but I'm not an honest feller, guv'nor. There, if you don't mind me saying so, no offence meant and none, I 'ope, taken, is where you make your bloomin' error. I'm a pore sinner and backslider and evildoer and . . ."

"Joe," said Myrtle, with a certain menacing calm, "if you get a thick ear, always remember that you asked for it. The same applies to a lump the size of an egg on top of your ugly head through coming into violent contact with the knob of my parasol. Will you or will you not," she said, taking a firmer grip of the handle of the weapon to which she had alluded, "push off?"

"Lady," said Joe Beamish, not without a rough dignity, "as soon as I've done what I come to do, I will withdraw. But first I got to do what I come to do. And what I come to do is 'and back in a meek and contrite spirit this 'ere album of stamps what I snitched last night, never thinking that I was to 'ear that there wonderful sermon and see the light. But 'avin' 'eard that there wonderful sermon and seen the light, I now 'ave great pleasure in doing what I come to do, namely," said Jeo Beamish, thrusting the late J. G. Beenstock's stamp collection into Anselm's hand, "this 'ere. Lady . . . Guv'nor . . . With these few words, 'opin' that you are in the pink as it leaves me at present, I will now withdraw."

"Stop!" cried Anselm.

"R?"

Anselm's face was strangely contorted. He spoke with difficulty.

"Joe. . . ."

"Yes, guv'nor?"

"Joe . . . I would like . . . I would prefer . . . In a very real sense I do so feel . . . In short, I would like you to keep this stamp album, Joe."

The burglar shook his head.

"No, guv'nor. It can't be done. When I think of that there wonderful sermon and all those beautiful things you said in that there wonderful sermon about the 'Ivites and the 'Ittites and doing the right thing by the neighbours and 'elping so far as in you lies to spread sweetness and light throughout the world, I can't keep no albums which 'ave come into my possession through

gettin' in at other folks' french winders on account of not 'avin' seen the light. It don't belong to me, not that album don't, and I now take much pleasure in 'andin' it back with these few words. Goo' night, guv'nor. Goo' night, lady. Goo' night all. I will now withdraw."

His footsteps died away, and there was silence in the quiet garden. Both Anselm and Myrtle were busy with their thoughts. Once more through Anselm's mind there was racing that pithy address which the coach of his college boat had delivered when trying to do justice to the spectacle of Number Five's obtrusive stomach: while Myrtle, on her side, was endeavouring not to give utterance to a rough translation of something she had once heard a French taxi-driver say to a gendarme during her finishing-school days in Paris.

Anselm was the first to speak.

"This, dearest," he said, "calls for discussion. One does so feel that little or nothing can be accomplished without earnest thought and a frank round-table conference. Let us go indoors and thresh the whole matter out in as calm a spirit as we can achieve."

He led the way to the study and seated himself moodily, his chin in his hands, his brow furrowed. A deep sigh escaped him.

"I understand now,"he said, "why it is that curates are not permitted to preach on Sunday evenings during the summer months. It is not safe. It is like exploding a bomb in a public place. It upsets existing conditions too violently. When I reflect that, had our good vicar but been able to take evensong to-night, this distressing thing would not have occurred, I find myself saying in the words of the prophet Hosea to the children of Adullam . . ."

"Putting the prophet Hosea to one side for the moment and temporarily pigeon-holing the children of Adullam," interrupted Myrtle, "what are we going to do about this?"

Anselm sighed again.

"Alas, dearest, there you have me. I assume that it is no longer feasible to submit a claim to the London and Midland Counties Mutual Aid and Benefit Association."

"So we lose five thousand of the best and brightest?"

Anselm winced. The lines deepened on his careworn face.

"It is not an agreeable thing to contemplate, I agree. One had been looking on the sum as one's little nest-egg. One did so want

to see it safely in the bank, to be invested later in sound, income-bearing securities. I confess to feeling a little vexed with Joe Beamish."

"I hope he chokes."

"I would not go so far as that, darling," said Anselm, with loving rebuke. "But I must admit that if I heard that he had tripped over a loose shoelace and sprained his ankle, it would—in the deepest and truest sense—be all right with me. I deplore the man's tactless impulsiveness. 'Officious' is the word that springs to the lips."

Myrtle was musing.

"Listen," she said. "Why not play a little joke on these London and Midland bozos? Why tell them you've got the stamps back? Why not just sit tight and send in the claim and pouch their cheque? That would be a lot of fun."

Again, for the second time in two days, Anselm found himself looking a little askance at his loved one. Then he reminded himself that she was scarcely to be blamed for her somewhat unconventional outlook. The niece of a prominent financier, she was perhaps entitled to be somewhat eccentric in her views. No doubt, her earliest childhood memories were of coming down to dessert and hearing her elders discuss over the nuts and wine some burgeoning scheme for trimming the investors.

He shook his head.

"I could hardly countenance such a policy, I fear. To me there seems something—I do not wish to hurt your feelings, dearest—something almost dishonest about what you suggest. Besides," he added meditatively, "when Joe Beamish handed back that album, he did it in the presence of witnesses."

"Witnesses?"

"Yes, dearest. As we came into the house, I observed a shadowy figure. Whose it was, I cannot say, but of this I feel convinced—that this person, whoever he may have been, heard all."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure. He was standing beneath the cedar-tree, within easy earshot. And, as you know, our worthy Beamish's voice is of a robust and carrying timbre."

He broke off. Unable to restrain her pent-up feelings any longer, Myrtle Jellaby had uttered the words which the taxi-driver had said to the gendarme, and there was that about them which might well have rendered a tougher curate than Anselm

temporarily incapable of speech. A throbbing silence followed the ejaculation. And during this silence there came to their ears from the garden without a curious sound.

"Hark," said Myrtle.

They listened. What they heard was unmistakably a human being sobbing.

"Some fellow creature in trouble," said Anselm.

"Thank goodness," said Myrtle.

"Should we go and ascertain the sufferer's identity?"

"Let's," said Myrtle. "I have an idea it may be Joe Beamish. In which case, what I am going to do to him with my parasol will be nobody's business."

But the mourner was not Joe Beamish, who had long since gone off to the Goose and Grasshopper. To Anselm, who was short-sighted, the figure leaning against the cedar-tree, shaking with uncontrollable sobs, was indistinct and unrecognizable, but Myrtle, keener-eyed, uttered a cry of surprise.

"Uncle!"

"Uncle?" said Anselm, astonished.

"It is Uncle Leopold."

"Yes," said the O.B.E., choking down a groan and moving away from the tree, "it is I. Is that Mulliner standing beside you, Myrtle?"

"Yes."

"Mulliner," said Sir Leopold Jellaby, "you find me in tears. And why am I in tears? Because, my dear Mulliner, I am still overwhelmed by that wonderful sermon of yours on Brotherly Love and our duty to our neighbours."

Anselm began to wonder if ever a curate had had notices like these.

"Oh, thanks," he said, shuffling a foot. "Awfully glad you liked it."

"'Liked it', Mulliner, is a weak term. That sermon has revolutionized my entire outlook. It has made me a different man. I wonder, Mulliner, if you can find me pen and ink inside the house?"

"Pen and ink?"

"Precisely. I wish to write you a cheque for ten thousand pounds for that stamp collection of yours."

"Ten thousand!"

"Come inside," said Myrtle. "Come right in."

"You see," said Sir Leopold, as they led him to the study and plied him with many an eager query as to whether he preferred a thick nib or a thin, "when you showed me those stamps yesterday, I recognized their value immediately—they would fetch five thousand pounds anywhere—so I naturally told you they were worthless. It was one of those ordinary, routine business precautions which a man is bound to take. One of the first things I remember my dear father saying to me, when he sent me out to battle with the world, was 'Never give a sucker an even break,' and until now I have always striven not to do so. But your sermon to-night has made me see that there is something higher and nobler than a code of business ethics. Shall I cross the cheque?"

"If you please."

"No," said Myrtle. "Make it open."

"Just as you say, my dear. You appear," said the kind old squire, smiling archly through his tears, "to be showing considerable interest in the matter. Am I to infer——?"

"I love Anselm. We are engaged."

"Mulliner! Is this so?"

"Er—yes," said Anselm. "I was meaning to tell you about that."

Sir Leopold patted him on the shoulder.

"I could wish her no better husband. There. There is your cheque, Mulliner. The collection, as I say, is worth five thousand pounds, but after that sermon, I give ten freely—freely!"

Anselm, like one in a dream, took the oblong slip of paper and put it in his pocket. Silently, he handed the album to Sir Leopold.

"Thank you," said the latter. "And now, my dear fellow, I think I shall have to ask you for the loan of a clean pocket handkerchief. My own, as you see, is completely saturated."

It was while Anselm was in his room, rummaging in the chest of drawers, that a light footstep caused him to turn. Myrtle was standing in the doorway, a finger on her lip.

"Anselm," she whispered, "have you a fountain-pen?"

"Certainly, dearest. There should be one in this drawer. Yes, here it is. You wish to write something?"

"I wish you to write something. Endorse that cheque here and now, and give it to me, and I will motor to London to-night in my two-seater, so as to be at the bank the moment it opens and deposit it. You see, I know Uncle Leopold. He might take it into his head, after he had slept on it and that sermon had worn off a

bit, to 'phone and stop payment. You know how he feels about business precautions. This way we shall avoid all rannygazoo."

Anselm kissed her fondly.

"You think of everything, dearest," he said. "How right you are. One does so wish, does one not, to avoid rannygazoo."

6

Romance at Droitgate Spa

WHEN young Freddie Fitch-Fitch went down to Droitgate Spa, that celebrated cure resort in the west of England, to ask his uncle and trustee, Major-General Sir Aylmer Bastable, to release his capital in order that he might marry Annabel Purvis, he was fully alive to the fact that the interview might prove a disagreeable one. However, his great love bore him on, and he made the journey and was shown into the room where the old man sat nursing a gouty foot.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo, uncle," he cried, for it was always his policy on these occasions to be buoyant till thrown out. "Good morning, good morning, good morning."

"Gaw!" said Sir Aylmer, with a sort of long, shuddering sigh. "It's you, is it?"

And he muttered something which Freddie did not quite catch, though he was able to detect the words "last straw".

Freddie's heart sank a little. He could see that his flesh and blood was in difficult mood, and he guessed what must have happened. No doubt Sir Aylmer had been to the Pump Room earlier in the day to take the waters, and while there had met and been high-hatted by some swell whom the doctors had twice given up for dead. These snobs, he knew, were always snubbing the unfortunate old man.

On coming to settle in Droitgate Spa, Sir Aylmer Bastable had had a humiliating shock. The head of a fine old family and the possessor of a distinguished military record, he had expected on his arrival to be received with open arms by the best people and welcomed immediately into the inner set. But when it was discovered that all he had wrong with him was a touch of gout in the right foot, he found himself cold-shouldered by the men who mattered and thrust back on the society of the asthma patients and the fellows with slight liver trouble.

For though few people are aware of it—so true is it that half the world does not know how the other half lives—there is no

section of the community in which class-consciousness is so rampant as among invalids. The ancient Spartans, one gathers, were far from cordial towards their Helots, and the French aristocrat of pre-Revolution days tended to be a little stand-offish with his tenantry, but their attitude was almost back-slapping compared with that of—let us say—the man who has been out in Switzerland taking insulin for his diabetes towards one who is simply undergoing treatment from the village doctor for an ingrowing toe-nail. And this is particularly so, of course, in those places where invalids collect in gangs—Baden-Baden, for example, or Hot Springs, Virginia, or, as in Sir Aylmer's case, Droitgate Spa.

In such resorts the atmosphere is almost unbelievably cliquy. The old aristocracy, the top-notchers with maladies that get written up in the medical journals, keep themselves to themselves pretty rigidly, and have a very short way with the smaller fry.

It was this that had soured Sir Aylmer Bastable's once sunny disposition and caused him now to glare at Freddie with an unfriendly eye.

"Well," he said, "what do you want?"

"Oh, I just looked in," said Freddie. "How's everything?"

"Rotten," replied Sir Aylmer. "I've just lost my nurse."

"Dead?"

"Worse. Married. The cloth-headed girl has gone off and got spliced to one of the *canaille*—a chap who's never even had so much as athlete's foot. She must be crazy."

"Still, one sees her point of view."

"No, one doesn't."

"I mean," said Freddie, who felt strongly on this subject, "it's love that makes the world go round."

"It isn't anything of the kind," said Sir Aylmer. Like so many fine old soldiers, he was inclined to be a little literal-minded. "I never heard such dashed silly nonsense in my life. What makes the world go round is . . . Well, I've forgotten at the moment, but it certainly isn't love. How the dooce could it?"

"Oh, right-ho. I see what you mean," said Freddie. "But put it another way. Love conquers all. Love's all right. Take it from me."

The old man looked at him sharply.

"Are you in love?"

"Madly."

"Of all the young cuckoos! And I suppose you've come to ask for money to get married on?"

"Not at all. I just dropped round to see how you were. Still, as the subject has happened to crop up——"

Sir Aylmer brooded for a moment, snorting in an undertone.

"Who's the girl?" he demanded.

Freddie coughed, and fumbled with his collar. The crux of the situation, he realized, had now been reached. He had feared from the first that this was where the good old snag might conceivably sidle into the picture. For his Annabel was of humble station, and he knew how rigid were his relative's views on the importance of birth. No bigger snob ever swallowed a salicylate pill.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he said, "she's a conjurer's stooge."

"A *what?*"

"A conjurer's assistant, don't you know. I saw her first at a charity matinée. She was abetting a bloke called The Great Boloni."

"In what sense, abetting?"

"Well, she stood there up-stage, don't you know, and every now and then she would skip down-stage, hand this chap a bowl of goldfish or something, beam at the audience, do a sort of dance step and skip back again. You know the kind of thing."

A dark frown had come into Sir Aylmer's face.

"I do," he said grimly. "My only nephew has been ensnared by a bally, beaming goldfish-handler! Ha!"

"I wouldn't call it ensnared exactly," said Freddie deferentially.

"I would," said Sir Aylmer. "Get out of here."

"Right," said Freddie, and caught the two-thirty-five express back to London. And it was during the journey that an idea flashed upon him.

The last of the Fitch-Fitches was not a great student of literature, but he occasionally dipped into a magazine: and everybody who has ever dipped into a magazine has read a story about a hard-hearted old man who won't accept the hero's girl at any price, so what do they do but plant her on him without telling him who she is and, by Jove, he falls under her spell completely, and then they tear off their whiskers and there they are. There was a story of this nature in the magazine which Freddie had purchased at the bookstall at Droitgate Spa Station, and, as he

read it, he remembered what his uncle had told him about his nurse handing in her portfolio.

By the time the train checked in at Paddington, his plans were fully formed.

"Listen," he said to Annabel Purvis, who had met him at the terminus, and Annabel said: "What?"

"Listen," said Freddie, and Annabel again said: "What?"

"Listen," said Freddie, clasping her arm tenderly and steering her off in the direction of the refreshment-room, where it was his intention to have a quick one. "To a certain extent I am compelled to admit that my expedition has been a wash-out . . ."

Annabel caught her breath sharply.

"No blessing?"

"No blessing."

"And no money?"

"No money. The old boy ran entirely true to stable form. He listened to what I had to say, snorted in an unpleasant manner and threw me out. The old routine. But what I'm working round to is that the skies are still bright and the blue bird on the job. I have a scheme. Could you be a nurse?"

"I used to nurse my Uncle Joe."

"Then you shall nurse my Uncle Aylmer. The present incumbent, he tells me, has just tuned out, and he needs a successor. I will 'phone him that I am dispatching immediately a red-hot nurse whom he will find just the same as Mother makes, and you shall go down to Droitgate Spa and ingratiate yourself."

"But how?"

"Why, cluster round him. Smooth his pillow. Bring him cooling drinks. Coo to him, and give him the old oil. Tell him you are of gentle birth, if that's the expression I want. And when the time is ripe, when you have entwined yourself about his heart and he looks upon you as a daughter, shoot me a wire and I'll come down and fall in love with you and he will give us his consent, blessing and the stuff. I guarantee this plan. It works."

So Annabel went to Droitgate Spa, and about three weeks later a telegram arrived for Freddie, running as follows:

"*Have ingratiated self. Come at once. Love and kisses. Annabel.*"

Within an hour of its arrival, Freddie was on his way to Podagra Lodge, his uncle's residence.

He found Sir Aylmer in his study. Annabel was sitting by his side, reading aloud to him from a recently published monograph on certain obscure ailments of the medulla oblongata. For the old man, though a mere gout patient, had pathetic aspirations towards higher things.There was a cooling drink on the table,and, as Freddie entered, the girl paused in her reading to smooth her employer's pillow.

"Gaw!" said Sir Aylmer. "You again?"

"Here I am," said Freddie.

"Well, by an extraordinary chance, I'm glad to see you. Leave us for a moment, Miss Purvis. I wish to speak to my nephew here, such as he is, on a serious and private matter. Did you notice that girl?" he said, as the door closed.

"I did, indeed."

"Pretty."

"An eyeful."

"And as good," said Sir Aylmer, "as she is beautiful. You should see her smooth pillows. And what a cooling drink she mixes! Excellent family, too, I understand. Her father is a colonel. Or, rather, was. He's dead."

"Ah, well, all flesh is as grass."

"No, it isn't. It's nothing of the kind. The two things are entirely different. I've seen flesh and I've seen grass. No resemblance whatever. However, that is not the point at issue. What I wanted to say was that if you were not a damn fool, that's the sort of girl you would be in love with."

"I am."

"A damn fool?"

"No. In love with that girl."

"What! You have fallen in love with Miss Purvis? Already?"

"I have."

"Well, that's the quickest thing I ever saw. What about your beaming goldfish?"

"Oh, that's all over. A mere passing boyish fancy."

Sir Aylmer took a deep swig at his cooling drink, and regarded him in silence for a moment.

"Well," he said, at length, breathing heavily, "if that's the airy, casual way in which you treat life's most sacred emotions, the sooner you are safely married and settled down, the better. If you're allowed to run around loose much longer, indulging those boyish fancies of yours, I foresee the breach of promise case of the

century. However, I'm not saying I'm not relieved. I am relieved. I suppose she wore tights, this goldfish girl?"

"Pink."

"Disgusting. Thank God it's all over. Very good, then. You are free, I understand, to have a pop at Miss Purvis. Do you propose to do so?"

"I do."

"Excellent. You get that sweet, refined, most-suitable-in-all-respects girl to marry you, and I'll hand over that money of yours, every penny of it."

"I will start at once."

"Heaven speed your wooing," said Sir Aylmer.

And ten minutes later Freddie was able to inform his uncle that his whirlwind courtship had been successful, and Sir Aylmer said that when he had asked Heaven to speed his wooing he had had no notion that it would speed it to quite that extent. He congratulated Freddie warmly and said he hoped that he appreciated his good fortune, and Freddie said he certainly did, because his love was like a red, red rose, and Sir Aylmer said "No, she wasn't," and when Freddie added that he was walking on air Sir Aylmer said he couldn't be—the thing was physically impossible.

However, he gave his blessing and promised to release Freddie's capital as soon as the necessary papers were drawn up, and Freddie went back to London to see his lawyer about this.

His mood, as the train sped through the quiet countryside, was one of perfect tranquillity and happiness. It seemed to him that his troubles were now definitely ended. He looked down the vista of the years and saw nothing but joy and sunshine. If somebody had told Frederick Fitch-Fitch at that moment that even now a V-shaped depression was coming along which would shortly blacken the skies and lower the general temperature to freezing-point, he would not have believed him.

Nor when, two days later, as he sat in his club, he was informed that a Mr. Rackstraw was waiting to see him in the small smoking-room, did he have an inkling that here was the V-shaped depression in person. His heart was still light as he went down the passage, wondering idly, for the name was unfamiliar to him, who this Mr. Rackstraw might be. He entered the room, and found there a tall, thin man with pointed black moustaches who was pacing up and down, nervously taking rabbits out of his top-hat as he walked.

"Mr. Rackstraw?"

His visitor spun round, dropping a rabbit. He gazed at Freddie piercingly. He had bright, glittering, sinister eyes.

"That is my name. Mortimer Rackstraw."

Freddie's mind had flown back to the charity matinée at which he had first seen Annabel, and he recognized the fellow now.

"The Great Boloni, surely?"

"I call myself that professionally. So you are Mr. Fitch? So *you* are Mr. Fitch? Ha! Fiend!"

"Eh?"

"I am not mistaken. You are Frederick Fitch?"

"Frederick Fitch-Fitch."

"I beg your pardon. In that case, I should have said 'Fiend! Fiend!' "

He produced a pack of cards and asked Freddie to take one—any one—and memorize it and put it back. Freddie did so absently. He was considerably fogged. He could make nothing of all this.

"How do you mean—Fiend-Fiend?" he asked.

The other sneered unpleasantly.

"Cad!" he said, twirling his moustache.

"Cad?" said Freddie, mystified.

"Yes, sir. Cad. You have stolen the girl I love."

"I don't understand."

"Then you must be a perfect ass. It's quite simple. isn't it? I can't put it any plainer, can I? I say you have stolen . . . Well, look here," said Mortimer Rackstraw. "Suppose this top-hat is me. This rabbit," he went on, producing it from the lining, "is the girl I love. You come along and—presto—the rabbit vanishes."

"It's up your sleeve."

"It is not up my sleeve. And if it were, if I had a thousand sleeves and rabbits up every one of them, that would not alter the fact that you have treacherously robbed me of Annabel Purvis."

Freddie began to see daylight. He was able to appreciate the other's emotion. "So you love Annabel, too?"

"I do."

"I don't wonder. Nice girl, what? I see, I see. You worshipped her in secret, never telling your love."

"I did tell my love. We were engaged."

"Engaged?"

"Certainly. And this morning I get a letter from her saying that

it's all off, because she has changed her mind and is going to marry you. She has thrown me over."

"Oh, ah? Well, I'm frightfully sorry—deepest sympathy, and all that, but I don't see what's to be done about it, what?"

"I do. There still remains—revenge."

"Oh, I say, dash it! You aren't going to be stuffy about it?"

"I am going to be stuffy about it. For the moment you triumph. But do not imagine that this is the end. You have not heard the last of me. Not by any means. You may have stolen the woman I love with your underhand chicanery, but I'll fix you."

"How?"

"Never mind how. You will find out how quite soon enough. A nasty jolt you're going to get, my good fiend, and almost immediately. As sure," said Mortimer Rackstraw, illustrating by drawing one from Freddie's back hair, "as eggs are eggs. I wish you a very good afternoon."

He took up his top-hat, which in his emotion he had allowed to fall to the ground, brushed it on his coat-sleeve, extracted from it a cage of love-birds and strode out.

A moment later, he returned, bowed a few times to right and left and was gone again.

To say that Freddie did not feel a little uneasy as the result of this scene would be untrue. There had been something in the confident manner in which the other had spoken of revenging himself that he had not at all liked. The words had had a sinister ring, and all through the rest of the day he pondered thoughtfully, wondering what a man so trained in the art of having things up his sleeve might have up it now. It was in meditative mood that he dined, and only on the following morning did his equanimity return to him.

Able, now that he had slept on it, to review the disturbing conversation in its proper perspective, he came to the conclusion that the fellow's threats had been mere bluff. What, after all, he asked himself, could this conjurer do? It was not as if they had been living in the Middle Ages, when chaps of that sort used to put spells on you and change you into things.

No, he decided, it was mere bluff, and with his complacency completely restored had just lighted a cigarette and fallen to dreaming of the girl he loved, when a telegram was brought to him.

It ran as follows:

Come at once. All lost. Ruin stares face. Love and kisses. Annabel.

Half an hour later he was in the train, speeding towards Droitgate Spa.

It had been Freddie's intention, on entering the train, to devote the journey to earnest meditation. But, as always happens when one wishes to concentrate and brood during a railway journey, he found himself closeted with a talkative fellow-traveller.

The one who interrupted Freddie's thoughts was a flabby, puffy man of middle age, wearing a red waistcoat, brown shoes, a morning coat and a bowler hat. With such a Grade A bounder, even had his mind been at rest, Freddie would have had little in common, and he sat chafing while the prismatic fellow prattled on. Nearly an hour passed before he was freed from the infliction of the other's conversation, but eventually the man's head began to nod, and presently he was snoring and Freddie was able to give himself up to his reverie.

His thoughts became less and less agreeable as the train rolled on. And what rendered his mental distress so particularly acute was the lack of detail in Annabel's telegram. It seemed to him to offer so wide a field for uncomfortable speculation.

"All lost," for instance. A man could do a lot of thinking about a phrase like that. And "Ruin stares face." Why, he asked himself, did ruin stare face? While commending Annabel's thriftiness in keeping the thing down to twelve words, he could not help wishing that she could have brought herself to spring another twopence and be more lucid.

But of one thing he felt certain. All this had something to do with his recent visitor. Behind that mystic telegram he seemed to see the hand of Mortimer Rackstraw, that hand whose quickness deceived the eye, and he knew that in lightly dismissing the other as a negligible force he had been to sanguine.

By the time he reached Podagra Lodge, the nervous strain had become almost intolerable. As he rang the bell he was quivering like some jelly set before a diet-patient, and the sight of Annabel's face as she opened the door did nothing to alleviate his perturbation. The girl was obviously all of a twitter.

"Oh, Freddie!" she cried. "The worst has happened."

Freddie gulped.

"Rackstraw?"

"Yes," said Annabel. "But how did you know about him?"

"He came to see me, bubbling over a good deal with veiled menaces and what not," explained Freddie. He frowned, and eyed her closely. "Why didn't you tell me you had been engaged to that bird?"

"I didn't think you would be interested. It was just a passing girlish fancy."

"You're sure? You didn't really love this blighted prestidigitator?"

"No, no. I was dazzled for a while, as any girl might have been when he sawed me in half, but then you came along and I saw that I had been mistaken, and that you were the only man in the world for me."

"Good egg," said Freddie, relieved.

He kissed her fondly and, as he did so, there came to his ears the sound of rhythmic hammering from somewhere below.

"What's that?" he asked.

Annabel wrung her hands.

"It's Mortimer!"

"Is he here?"

"Yes. He arrived on the one-fifteen. I locked him in the cellar."

"Why?"

"To stop him going to the Pump Room."

"Why shouldn't he go to the Pump Room?"

"Because Sir Aylmer has gone there to listen to the band, and they must not meet. If they do, we are lost. Mortimer has hatched a fearful plot."

Freddie's heart seemed to buckle under within him. He had tried to be optimistic, but all along he had known that Mortimer Rackstraw would hatch some fearful plot. He could have put his shirt on it. A born hatcher.

"What plot?"

Annabel wrung her hands again.

"He means to introduce Sir Aylmer to my Uncle Joe. He wired Uncle Joe to come to Droitgate Spa. He had arranged to meet him at the Pump Room, and then he was going to introduce him to Sir Aylmer."

Freddie was a little fogged. It did not seem to him much of a plot.

"Now that I can never be his, all he wants is to make himself

unpleasant and prevent our marriage. And he knows that Sir Aylmer will never consent to your marrying me if he finds out that I have an uncle like Uncle Joe."

Freddie ceased to be fogged. He saw the whole devilish scheme now—a scheme worthy of the subtle brain that could put the ace of spades back in the pack, shuffle, cut three times, and then produce it from the inside of a lemon.

"Is he so frightful?" he quavered.

"Look," said Annabel simply. She took a photograph from her bosom and extended it towards him with a trembling hand. "That is Uncle Joe, taken in the lodge regalia of a Grand Exalted Periwinkle of the Mystic Order of Whelks."

Freddie glanced at the photograph and started back with a hoarse cry. Annabel nodded sadly.

"Yes," she said. "That is how he takes most people. The only faint hope I have is that he won't have been able to come. But if he has——"

"He has," cried Freddie, who had been fighting for breath. "We travelled down in the train together."

"What?"

"Yes. He must be waiting at the Pump Room now."

"And at any moment Mortimer will break his way out of the cellar. The door is not strong. What shall we do?"

"There is only one thing to do. I have all the papers . . ."

"You have no time to read now."

"The legal papers, the ones my uncle has to sign in order to release my money. There is just a chance that if I rush to the Pump Room I may get him to put his name on the dotted line before the worst happens."

"Then rush," cried Annabel.

"I will," said Freddie. He kissed her quickly, grabbed his hat, and was off the mark like a jack rabbit.

A man who is endeavouring to lower the record for the distance between Podagra Lodge, which is in Arterio-Sclerosis Avenue, and the Droitgate Spa Pump Room has little leisure for thinking, but Freddie managed to put in a certain amount as his feet skimmed the pavement. And the trend of his thought such as to give renewed vigour to his legs. He could scarcely have moved more rapidly if he had been a character in a two-reel film with the police after him.

And there was need for speed. Beyond a question, Annabel had been right when she had said that Sir Alymer would never consent to their union if he found out that she had an uncle like her Uncle Joe. Uncle Joe would get right in amongst him. Let them but meet, and nothing was more certain than that the haughty old man would veto the proposed nuptials.

A final burst of speed took him panting up the Pump Room steps and into the rotunda where all that was best and most refined in Droitgate Spa was accustomed to assemble of an afternoon and listen to the band. He saw Sir Aylmer in a distant seat and hurried towards him.

"Gaw!" said Sir Aylmer. "You?"

Freddie could only nod.

"Well, stop puffing like that and sit down," said Sir Aylmer. "They're just going to play 'Poet and Peasant'."

Freddie recovered his breath.

"Uncle," he began. But it was too late. Even as he spoke, the conductor's baton fell and Sir Aylmer's face assumed that reverent doughlike expression of attention so familiar to the rotundas of cure resorts.

"S'h," he said.

Of all the uncounted millions who in their time have listened to bands playing "Poet and Peasant", few can ever have listened with such a restless impatience as did Frederick Fitch-Fitch on this occasion. Time was flying. Every second was precious. At any moment disaster might befall. And the band went on playing as if it had taken on a life-job. It seemed to him an eternity before the final oom-pom-pa.

"Uncle," he cried, as the echoes died away.

"S'h," said Sir Aylmer testily, and Freddie, with a dull despair, perceived that they were going to get an encore.

Of all the far-flung myriads who year in and year out have listened to bands playing the overture to "Raymond", few can ever have chafed as did Frederick Fitch-Fitch now. This suspense was unmanning him, this delay was torture. He took the papers and a fountain-pen from his pocket and toyed with them nervously. He wondered dully as he sat there how the opera "Raymond" had ever managed to get itself performed, if the overture was as long as this. They must have rushed it through in the last five minutes of the evening as the audience groped for its hats and wraps.

But there is an end to all things, even to the overture from "Raymond". Just as the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea, so does this overture eventually finish. And when it did, when the last notes faded into silence and the conductor stood bowing and smiling with that cool assumption, common to all conductors, that it is they and not the perspiring orchestra who have been doing the work, he started again.

"Uncle," he said, "may I trouble you for a moment? . . . These papers."

Sir Aylmer cocked an eye at the documents.

"What papers are those?"

"The ones you have to sign, releasing my capital."

"Oh, those," said Sir Aylmer genially. The music had plainly mellowed him. "Of course, yes. Certainly, certainly. Give me . . ."

He broke off, and Freddie saw that he was looking at a distinguished, silvery-haired man with thin, refined features, who was sauntering by.

"Afternoon, Rumbelow," he said.

There was an unmistakable note of obsequiousness in Sir Aylmer's voice. His voice had become pink, and he was shuffling his feet and twiddling his fingers. The man to whom he had spoken paused and looked down. Seeing who it was that accosted him, he raised a silvery eyebrow. His manner was undisguisedly supercilious.

"Ah, Bastable," he said distantly.

A duller man than Sir Aylmer Bastable could not have failed to detect the cold hauteur in his voice. Freddie saw the flush on his uncle's face deepen. Sir Aylmer mumbled something about hoping that the distinguished-looking man was feeling better to-day.

"Worse," replied the other curtly. "Much worse. The doctors are baffled. Mine is a very complicated case." He paused for a moment, and his delicately chiselled lip curled in a sneer. "And how is the gout, Bastable? Gout! Ha, ha!"

Without waiting for a reply he passed on and joined a group that stood chatting close by. Sir Aylmer choked down a mortified oath.

"Snob!" he muttered. "Thinks he's everybody just because he's got telangiectasis. I don't see what's so wonderful about having telangiectasis. Anybody could have . . . What on earth are you doing? What the devil's all this you're waving under my

nose? Papers? Papers? I don't want any papers. Take them away, sir!"

And before Freddie could burst into the impassioned plea which trembled on his lips, a commotion in the doorway distracted his attention. His heart missed a beat, and he sat there, frozen.

On the threshold stood Mortimer Rackstraw. He was making some inquiry of an attendant, and Freddie could guess only too well what that inquiry was. Mortimer Rackstraw was asking which of those present was Major-General Aylmer Bastable. Attached to his arm, obviously pleading with him and appealing to his better self, Annabel Purvis gazed up into his face with tear-filled eyes.

A moment later, the conjurer strode up, still towing the girl. He halted before Sir Aylmer and threw Annabel aside like a soiled glove. His face was cold and hard and remorseless. With one hand he was juggling mechanically with two billiard balls and a bouquet of roses.

"Sir Aylmer Bastable?"

"Yes."

"I forbid the banns."

"What banns?"

"Their banns," said Mortimer Rackstraw, removing from his lips the hand with which he had been coldly curling his moustache and jerking it in the direction of Annabel and Freddie, who stood clasped in each other's arms, waiting for they knew not what.

"They're not up yet," said Annabel.

The conjurer seemed a little taken aback.

"Oh?" he said. "Well, when they are, I forbid them. And so will you, Sir Aylmer, when you hear all."

Sir Aylmer puffed.

"Who is this tight bounder?" he asked irritably.

Mortimer Rackstraw shook his head and took the two of clubs from it.

"A bounder, maybe," he said, "but not tight. I have come here, Sir Aylmer, in a spirit of altruism to warn you that if you allow your nephew to marry this girl the grand old name of Bastable will be mud."

Sir Aylmer started.

"Mud?"

"Mud. She comes from the very dregs of society."

"I don't," cried Annabel.

"Of course she doesn't," cried Freddie.

"Certainly she does not," assented Sir Aylmer warmly. "She told me herself that her father was a colonel."

Mortimer Rackstraw uttered a short, sneering laugh and took an egg from his left elbow.

"She did, eh? Did she add that he was a colonel in the Salvation Army?"

"What!"

"And that before he saw the light he was a Silver Ring bookie, known to all the heads as Rat-Faced Rupert, the Bermondsey Twister?"

"Good God!"

Sir Aylmer turned to the girl with an awful frown.

"Is this true?"

"Of course it's true," said Mortimer Rackstraw. "And if you want further proof of her unfitness to be your nephew's bride, just take a look at her Uncle Joe, who is now entering left-centre."

And Freddie, listless now and without hope, saw that his companion of the train was advancing towards them. He heard Sir Aylmer gasp and was aware that Annabel had stiffened in his arms. He was not surprised. The sun, filtering through the glass of the rotunda, lit up the man's flabby puffiness, his morning coat, his red waistcoat and his brown shoes, and rarely if ever, thought Freddie, could the sun of Droitgate Spa have shone on a more ghastly outsider.

There was nothing, however, in the newcomer's demeanour to suggest that he felt himself out of place in these refined surroundings. His manner had an easy self-confidence. He sauntered up and without *gêne* slapped the conjurer on the back and patted Annabel on the shoulder.

"'Ullo, Mort. 'Ullo, Annie, my dear."

Sir Aylmer, who had blinked, staggered and finally recovered himself, spoke in a voice of thunder.

"You, sir! Is this true?"

"What's that, old cock?"

"Are you this girl's uncle?"

"That's right."

"Gaw!" said Sir Aylmer.

He would have spoken further, but at this point the band burst

into "Pomp and Circumstance", and conversation was temporarily suspended. When it beacme possible once more for the human voice to make itself heard, it was Annabel's Uncle Joe who took the floor. He had recognized Freddie.

"Why, I've met you," he said. "We travelled down in the train together. Who's this young feller, Annie, that's huggin' and squeezin' you?"

"He is the man I am going to marry," said Annabel.

"He is not the man you are going to marry," said Sir Aylmer.

"Yes, I am the man she is going to marry," said Freddie.

"No, you're not the man she is going to marry," said Mortimer Rackstraw.

Annabel's Uncle Joe seemed puzzled. He appeared not to know what to make of this conflict of opinion.

"Well, settle it among yourselves," he said genially. "All I know is that whoever does marry you, Annie, is going to get a good wife."

"That's me," said Freddie.

"No, it isn't," said Sir Aylmer.

"Yes, it is," said Annabel.

"No, it's not," said Mortimer Rackstraw.

"Because I'm sure no man," proceeded Uncle Joe, "ever had a better niece. I've never forgotten the way you used to come and smooth my pillow and bring me cooling drinks when I was in the hospital."

There was the sound of a sharp intake of breath. Sir Aylmer, who was saying, "It isn't, it isn't, it isn't," had broken off abruptly.

"Hospital?" he said. "Were you ever in a hospital?"

Mr. Boffin laughed indulgently.

"Was I ever in a hospital! That's a good 'un. That would make the boys on the Medical Council giggle. Ask them at St. Luke's if Joe Boffin was ever in a hospital. Ask them at St. Christopher's. Why, I've spent most of my life in hospitals. Started as a child with Congenital Pyloric Hypertrophy of the Stomach and never looked back."

Sir Aylmer was trembling violently. A look of awe had come into his face, the look which a small boy wears when he sees a heavyweight champion of the world.

"Did you say your name was Joe Boffin?"

"That's right."

"Not *the* Joe Boffin? Not the man there was that interview with in the Christmas number of *The Lancet*?"

"That's me."

Sir Aylmer started forward impulsively.

"May I shake your hand?"

"Put it there."

"I am proud to meet you, Mr. Boffin. I am one of your greatest admirers."

"Nice of you to say so, ol' man."

"Your career has been an inspiration to me. Is it really true that you have Thrombosis of the Heart *and* Vesicular Emphysema of the Lungs?"

"That's right."

"And that your temperature once went up to 107.5?"

"Twice. When I had Hyperpyrexia."

Sir Aylmer sighed.

"The best I've ever done is 102.2."

Joe Boffin patted him on the back.

"Well, that's not bad," he said. "Not bad at all."

"Excuse me," said a well-bred voice.

It was the distinguished-looking man with the silvery hair who had approached them, the man Sir Aylmer had addressed as Rumbelow. His manner was diffident. Behind him stood an eager group, staring and twiddling their fingers.

"Excuse me, my dear Bastable, for intruding on a private conversation, but I fancied . . . and my friends fancied . . ."

"We all fancied," said the group.

"That we overheard the name Boffin. Can it be, sir, that you are Mr. *Joseph* Boffin?"

"That's right."

"Boffin of St. Luke's?"

"That's right."

The silvery-haired man seemed overcome by a sudden shyness. He giggled nervously.

"Then may we say—my friends and I—how much . . . We felt we would just like . . . Unwarrantable intrusion, of course, but we are all such great admirers. I suppose you have to go through a good deal of this sort of thing, Mr. Boffin. . . . People coming up to you, I mean, and . . . Perfect strangers, I mean to say . . ."

"Quite all right, old man, quite all right. Always glad to meet the fans."

"Then may I introduce myself. I am Lord Rumbelow. These are my friends, the Duke of Mull, the Marquis of Peckham, Lord Percy . . ."

"'Ow are you, 'ow are you? Come and join us, boys. My niece, Miss Purvis."

"Charmed."

"The young chap she's going to marry."

"How do you do?"

"And his uncle, Sir Aylmer Bastable."

All heads were turned towards the Major-General. Lord Rumbelow spoke in awed voice.

"Is this really so, Bastable? Your nephew is actually going to marry Mr. Boffin's niece? I congratulate you, my dear fellow. A most signal honour." A touch of embarrassment came into his manner. He coughed. "We were just talking about you, oddly enough, Bastable, my friends and I. Saying what a pity it was that we saw so little of you. And we were wondering—it was the Duke's suggestion—if you would care to become a member of a little club we have—quite a small affair—rather exclusive, we like to feel—the Twelve Jolly Stretcher-Cases. . . ."

"My dear Rumbelow!"

"We have felt for a long time that our company was incomplete without you. So you will join us? Capital, capital! Perhaps you will look in there to-night? Mr. Boffin, of course," he went on deprecatingly, "would, I am afraid, hardly condescend to allow himself to be entertained by so humble a little circle. Otherwise——"

Joe Boffin slapped him affably on the back.

"My dear feller, I'd be delighted. There's nothing stuck-up about me."

"Well, really! I hardly know what to say. . . ."

"We can't all be Joe Boffins. That's the way I look at it."

"The true democratic spirit."

"Why, I was best man at a chap's wedding last week, and all he'd got was emotional dermatitis."

"Amazing! Then you and Sir Aylmer will be with us to-night? Delightful. We can give you a bottle of lung tonic which I think you will appreciate. We pride ourselves on our cellar."

A babble of happy chatter had broken out, almost drowning the band, and Mr. Boffin, opening his waistcoat, was showing the Duke of Mull the scar left by his first operation. Sir Aylmer,

watching them with throbbing heart, was dizzily aware of a fountain-pen being thrust into his hand.

"Eh?" he said. "What? What's this? What, what?"

"The papers," said Freddie. "The merry old documents in the case. You sign here, where my thumb is."

"Eh? What? Eh? Ah, yes, to be sure. Yes, yes, yes," said Sir Aylmer, absently affixing his signature.

"Thank you, uncle, a thousand . . ."

"Quite, quite. But don't bother me now, my boy. Busy. Got a lot to talk about to those friends of mine. Take the girl away and give her a sulphur water."

And, brushing aside Mortimer Rackstraw, who was offering him a pack of cards, he joined the group about Joe Boffin. Freddie clasped Annabel in a fond embrace. Mortimer Rackstraw stood glaring for a moment, twisting his moustache. Then he took the flags of all nations from Annabel's back hair and, with a despairing gesture, strode from the room.

7

A Bit of Luck for Mabel

"LIFE, laddie," said Ukridge, "is very rum."

He had been lying for some time silent on the sofa, his face towards the ceiling; and I had supposed that he was asleep. But now it appeared that it was thought, not slumber, that had caused his unwonted quietude.

"Very, very rum," said Ukridge.

He heaved himself up and stared out of the window. The sitting-room window of the cottage which I had taken in the country looked upon a stretch of lawn, backed by a little spinney; and now there stole in through it from the waking world outside that first cool breeze which heralds the dawning of a summer day.

"Great Scott!" I said, looking at my watch. "Do you realize you've kept me up talking all night?"

Ukridge did not answer. There was a curious, far-away look on his face, and he uttered a sound like the last gurgle of an expiring soda-water siphon; which I took to be his idea of a sigh. I saw what had happened. There is a certain hour at the day's beginning which brings with it a strange magic, tapping wells of sentiment in the most hard-boiled. In this hour, with the sun pinking the eastern sky and the early bird chirping over its worm, Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge, that battered man of wrath, had become maudlin; and, instead of being allowed to go to bed, I was in for some story of his murky past.

"Extraordinarily rum," said Ukridge. "So is Fate. It's curious to think, Corky, old horse, that if things had not happened as they did I might now be a man of tremendous importance, looked up to and respected by all in Singapore."

"Why should anyone respect you in Singapore?"

"Rolling in money," proceeded Ukridge wistfully.

"You?"

"Yes, me. Did you ever hear of one of those blokes out East who didn't amass a huge fortune? Of course you didn't. Well, think what I should have done, with my brain and vision. Mabel's

father made a perfect pot of money in Singapore, and I don't suppose he had any vision whatever."

"Who was Mabel?"

"Haven't I ever spoken to you of Mabel?"

"No. Mabel who?"

"I won't mention names."

"I hate stories without names."

"You'll have this story without names—and like it," said Ukridge with spirit. He sighed again. A most unpleasant sound. "Corky, my boy," he said, "do you realize on what slender threads our lives hang? Do you realize how trifling can be the snags on which we stub our toes as we go through this world? Do you realize——"

"Get on with it."

"In my case it was a top-hat."

"What was a top-hat?"

"The snag."

"You stubbed your toe on a top-hat?"

"Figuratively, yes. It was a top-hat which altered the whole course of my life."

"You never had a top-hat."

"Yes, I did have a top-hat. It's absurd for you to pretend that I never had a top-hat. You know perfectly well that when I go to live with my Aunt Julia in Wimbledon I roll in top-hats—literally roll."

"Oh, yes, when you go to live with your aunt."

"Well, it was when I was living with her that I met Mabel. The affair of the top-hat happened——"

I looked at my watch again.

"I can give you half an hour," I said. "After that I'm going to bed. If you can condense Mabel into a thirty-minute sketch, carry on."

"This is not quite the sympathetic attitude I should like to see in an old friend, Corky."

"It's the only attitude I'm capable of at half-past three in the morning. Snap into it."

Ukridge pondered.

"It's difficult to know where to begin."

"Well, to start with, who was she?"

"She was the daughter of a bloke who ran some sort of immensely wealthy business in Singapore."

"Where did she live?"

"In Onslow Square."

"Where were you living?"

"With my aunt in Wimbledon."

"Where did you meet her?"

"At a dinner-party at my aunt's."

"You fell in love with her at first sight?"

"Yes."

"For a while it seemed that she might return your love?"

"Exactly."

"And then one day she saw you in a top-hat and the whole thing was off. There you are. The entire story in two minutes fifteen seconds. Now let's go to bed."

Ukridge shook his head.

"You've got it wrong, old horse. Nothing like that at all. You'd better let me tell the whole thing from the beginning."

The first thing I did after that dinner (said Ukridge) was to go and call at Onslow Square. As a matter of fact, I called about three times in the first week; and it seemed to me that everything was going like a breeze. You know what I'm like when I'm staying with my Aunt Julia, Corky. Dapper is the word. Debonair. Perfectly groomed. Mind you, I don't say I enjoy dressing the way she makes me dress when I'm with her, but there's no getting away from it that it gives me an air. Seeing me strolling along the street with the gloves, the cane, the spats, the shoes, and the old top-hat, you might wonder if I was a marquess or a duke, but you would be pretty sure I was one of the two.

These things count with a girl. They count still more with her mother. By the end of the second week you wouldn't be far wrong in saying that I was the popular pet at Onslow Square. And then, rolling in one afternoon for a dish of tea, I was shocked to perceive nestling in my favourite chair, with all the appearance of a cove who is absolutely at home, another bloke. Mabel's mother was fussing over him as if he were the long-lost son. Mabel seemed to like him a good deal. And the nastiest shock of all came when I discovered that the fellow was a baronet.

Now, you know as well as I do, Corky, that for the ordinary workaday bloke Barts are tough birds to go up against. There is something about Barts that appeals to the most soulful girl. And as for the average mother, she eats them alive. Even an elderly

Bart with two chins and a bald head is bad enough, and this was a young and juicy specimen. He had a clean-cut, slightly pimply, patrician face; and, what was worse, he was in the Coldstream Guards. And you will bear me out, Corky, when I say that, while an ordinary civilian Bart is bad enough, a Bart who is also a Guardee is a rival the stoutest-hearted cove might well shudder at.

And when you consider that practically all I had to put up against this serious menace was honest worth and a happy disposition, you will understand why the brow was a good deal wrinkled as I sat sipping my tea and listening to the rest of the company talking about people I'd never heard of and entertainments where I hadn't been among those we also noticed.

After a while the conversation turned to Ascot.

"Are you going to Ascot, Mr. Ukridge?" said Mabel's mother, apparently feeling that it was time to include me in the chit-chat.

"Wouldn't miss it for worlds," I said.

Though, as a matter of fact, until that moment I had rather intended to give it the go-by. Fond as I am of the sport of kings, to my mind a race meeting where you've got to go in a morning coat and a top-hat—with the thermometer probably in the nineties—lacks fascination. I'm all for being the young duke when occasion requires, but races and toppers don't seem to me to go together.

"That's splendid," said Mabel, and I'm bound to say these kind words cheered me up a good deal. "We shall meet there."

"Sir Aubrey," said Mabel's mother, "has invited us to his house-party."

"Taken a place for the week down there," explained the Bart.

"Ah!" I said. And, mark you, that was about all there was to say. For the sickening realization that this Guardee Bart, in addition to being a Bart and a Guardee, also possessed enough cash to take country houses for Ascot Week in that careless, off-hand manner seemed to go all over me like nettle-rash. I was rattled, Corky. Your old friend was rattled. I did some pretty tense thinking on my way back to Wimbledon.

When I got there, I found my aunt in the drawing-room. And suddenly something in her attitude seemed to smite me like a blow. I don't know if you have ever had that rummy feeling which seems to whisper in your ear that Hell's foundations are about to

quiver, but I got it the moment I caught sight of her. She was sitting bolt upright in a chair, and as I came in she looked at me. You know her, Corky, and you know just how she shoots her eyes at you without turning her head, as if she were a basilisk with a stiff neck. Well, that's how she looked at me now.

"Good evening," she said.

"Good evening," I said.

"So you've come in," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, then, you can go straight out again," she said.

"Eh," I said.

"And never come back," she said.

I goggled at her. Mark you, I had been heaved out of the old home by my Aunt Julia many a time before, so it wasn't as if I wasn't used to it; but I had never got the boot quite so suddenly before and so completely out of a blue sky. Usually, when Aunt Julia bungs me out on my ear, it is possible to see it coming days ahead.

"I might have guessed that something like this would happen," she said.

And then all things were made plain. She had found out about the clock. And it shows what love can do to a fellow, Corky, when I tell you that I had clean forgotten all about it.

You know the position of affairs when I go to live with my Aunt Julia. She feeds me and buys me clothes, but for some reason best known to her own distorted mind it is impossible to induce her to part with a little ready cash. The consequence was that, falling in love with Mabel as I had done and needing a quid or two for current expenses, I had had to rely on my native ingenuity and resource. It was absolutely imperative that I should give the girl a few flowers and chocolates from time to time, and this runs into money. So, seeing a rather juicy clock doing nothing on the mantelpiece of the spare bedroom, I had sneaked it off under my coat and put it up the spout at the local pawnbroker's. And now, apparently, in some devious and underhand manner she had discovered this.

Well, it was no good arguing. When my Aunt Julia is standing over you with her sleeves rolled up preparatory to getting a grip on the scruff of your neck and the seat of your trousers, it has always been my experience that words are useless. The only thing to do is to drift away and trust to Time, the great healer.

Some forty minutes later, therefore, a solitary figure might have been observed legging it to the station with a suit-case. I was out in the great world once more.

However, you know me, Corky. The Old Campaigner. It takes more than a knock like that to crush your old friend. I took a bed-sitting-room in Arundel Street and sat down to envisage the situation.

Undeniably things had taken a nasty twist, and many a man lacking my vision and enterprise might have turned his face to the wall and said: "This is the end!" But I am made of sterner stuff. It seemed to me that all was not yet over. I had packed the morning coat, the waistcoat, the trousers, the shoes, the spats, and the gloves, and had gone away wearing the old top-hat; so, from a purely ornamental point of view, I was in precisely the position I had been before. That is to say, I could still continue to call at Onslow Square; and, what is more, if I could touch George Tupper for a fiver—which I intended to do without delay—I should have the funds to go to Ascot.

The sun, it appeared to me, therefore, was still shining. How true it is, Corky, that, no matter how the tempests lower, there is always sunshine somewhere! How true it is—Oh, all right, I was only mentioning it.

Well, George Tupper, splendid fellow, parted without a murmur. Well, no, not—to be absolutely accurate—without a murmur. Still, he parted. And the position of affairs was now as follows. Cash in hand, five pounds. Price of admission to grandstand and paddock at Ascot for first day of meeting, two pounds. Time to elapse before Ascot, ten days. Net result—three quid in my kick to keep me going till then and pay my fare down and buy flowers and so on. It all looked very rosy.

But note, Corky, how Fate plays with us. Two days before Ascot, as I was coming back from having tea at Onslow Square—not a little preoccupied, for the Bart had been very strong on the wing that afternoon—there happened what seemed at first sight an irremediable disaster.

The weather, which had been fair and warm until that evening, had suddenly broken, and a rather nippy wind had sprung up from the east. Now, if I had not been so tensely occupied with my thoughts, brooding on the Bart, I should of course have exercised reasonable precautions; but, as it was, I turned the corner into

the Fulham Road in what you might call a brown study; and the first thing I knew my top-hat had been whisked off my head and was tooling along briskly in the direction of Putney.

Well, you know what the Fulham Road's like. A top-hat has about as much chance in it as a rabbit at a dog-show. I dashed after the thing with all possible speed, but what was the use? A taxi-cab knocked it sideways towards a 'bus; and the 'bus, curse it, did the rest. By the time the traffic had cleared a bit, I caught sight of the ruins and turned away with a silent groan. The thing wasn't worth picking up.

So there I was, dished.

Or, rather, what the casual observer who didn't know my enterprise and resource would have called dished. For a man like me, Corky, may be down, but he is never out. So swift were my mental processes that the time that elapsed between the sight of that ruined hat and my decision to pop round to the Foreign Office and touch George Tupper for another fiver was not more than fifty seconds. It is in the crises of life that brains really tell.

You can't accumulate if you don't speculate. So, though funds were running a bit low by this time, I invested a couple of bob in a cab. It was better to be two shillings out than to risk getting to the Foreign Office and finding that Tuppy had left.

Well, late though it was, he was still there. That's one of the things I like about George Tupper, one of the reasons why I always maintain that he will rise to impressive heights in his country's service—he does not shirk; he is not a clock-watcher. Many civil servants are apt to call it a day at five o'clock, but not George Tupper. That is why one of these days, Corky, when you are still struggling along turning out articles for *Interesting Bits* and writing footling short stories about girls who turn out to be the missing heiress, Tuppy will be Sir George Tupper, K.C.M.G. and a devil of a fellow among the Chancelleries.

I found him up to his eyes in official-looking papers, and I came to the point with all speed. I knew that he was probably busy declaring war on Montenegro or somewhere and wouldn't want a lot of idle chatter.

"Tuppy, old horse," I said, "it is imperative that I have a fiver immediately."

"A what?" said Tuppy.

"A tenner," I said.

It was at this point that I was horrified to observe in the man's eye that rather cold, forbidding look which you sometimes see in blokes' eyes on these occasions.

"I lent you five pounds only a week ago," he said.

"And may Heaven reward you, old horse," I replied courteously.

"What do you want any more for?"

I was just about to tell him the whole circumstances when it was as if a voice whispered to me: "Don't do it!" Something told me that Tuppy was in a nasty frame of mind and was going to turn me down—yes, me, an old schoolfellow, who had known him since he was in Eton collars. And at the same time I suddenly perceived, lying on a chair by the door, Tuppy's topper. For Tuppy is not one of those civil servants who lounge into Whitehall in flannels and a straw hat. He is a correct dresser, and I honour him for it.

"What on earth," said Tuppy, "do you need money for?"

"Personal expenses, laddie," I replied. "The cost of living is very high these days."

"What you want," said Tuppy, "is work."

"What I want," I reminded him—if old Tuppy has a fault, it is that he will not stick to the point—"is a fiver."

He shook his head in a way I did not like to see.

"It's very bad for you, all this messing about on borrowed money. It's not that I grudge it to you," said Tuppy; and I knew, when I heard him talk in that pompous, Foreign Official way, that something had gone wrong that day in the country's service. Probably the draft treaty with Switerland had been pinched by a foreign adventuress. That sort of thing is happening all the time in the Foreign Office. Mysterious veiled women blow in on old Tuppy and engage him in conversation, and when he turns round he finds the long blue envelope with the important papers in it gone.

"It's not that I grudge you the money," said Tuppy, "but you really ought to be in some regular job. I must think," said Tuppy, "I must think. I must have a look round."

"And meanwhile," I said, "the fiver?"

"No. I'm not going to give it to you."

"Only five pounds," I urged. "Five little pounds, Tuppy, old horse."

"No."

"You can chalk it up in the books to Office Expenses and throw the burden on the taxpayer."

"No."

"Will nothing move you?"

"No. And I'm awfully sorry, old man, but I must ask you to clear out now. I'm terribly busy."

"Oh, right-ho," I said.

He burrowed down into the documents again; and I moved to the door, scooped up the top-hat from the chair, and passed out.

Next morning, when I was having a bit of breakfast, in rolled old Tuppy.

"I say," said Tuppy.

"Say on, laddie."

"You know when you came to see me yesterday?"

"Yes. You've come to tell me you've changed your mind about that fiver?"

"No, I haven't come to tell you I've changed my mind about that fiver. I was going to say that, when I started to leave the office, I found my top-hat had gone."

"Too bad," I said.

Tuppy gave me a piercing glance.

"You didn't take it, I suppose?"

"Who, me? What would I want with a top-hat?"

"Well, it's very mysterious."

"I expect you'll find it was pinched by an international spy or something."

Tuppy brooded for some moments.

"It's all very odd," he said. "I've never had it happen to me before."

"One gets new experiences."

"Well, never mind about that. What I really came about was to tell you that I think I have got you a job."

"You don't mean that!"

"I met a man at the club last night who wants a secretary. It's more a matter with him of having somebody to keep his papers in order and all that sort of thing, so typing and shorthand are not essential. You can't do shorthand, I suppose?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Well, you're to go and see him to-morrow morning at ten. His name's Bulstrode, and you'll find him at my club. It's a good chance, so for Heaven's sake don't be lounging in bed at ten."

"I won't. I'll be up and ready, with a heart for any fate."

"Well, mind you are."

"And I am deeply grateful, Tuppy, old horse, for these esteemed favours."

"That's all right," said Tuppy. He paused at the door. "It's a mystery about that hat."

"Insoluble, I should say. I shouldn't worry any more about it."

"One moment it was there, and the next it had gone."

"How like life!" I said. "Makes one think a bit, that sort of thing."

He pushed off, and I was just finishing my breakfast when Mrs. Beale, my landlady, came in with a letter.

It was from Mabel, reminding me to be sure to come to Ascot. I read it three times while I was consuming a fried egg; and I am not ashamed to say, Corky, that tears filled my eyes. To think of her caring so much that she should send special letters urging me to be there made me tremble like a leaf. It looked to me as though the Bart's number was up. Yes, at that moment, Corky, I felt positively sorry for the Bart, who was in his way quite a good chap, though pimply.

That night I made my final preparations. I counted the cash in hand. I had just enough to pay my fare to Ascot and back, my entrance fee to the grandstand and paddock, with a matter of fifteen bob over for lunch and general expenses and a thoughtful ten bob to do a bit of betting with. Financially, I was on velvet.

Nor was there much wrong with the costume department. I dug out the trousers, the morning coat, the waistcoat, the shoes and the spats, and I tried on Tuppy's topper again. And for the twentieth time I wished that old Tuppy, a man of sterling qualities in every other respect, had had a slightly bigger head. It's a curious thing about old George Tupper. There's a man who you might say is practically directing the destinies of a great nation —at any rate, he's in the Foreign Office and extremely well thought of by the Nibs—and yet his size in hats is a small seven. I don't know if you've ever noticed that Tuppy's head goes up to a sort of point. Mine, on the other hand, is shaped more like a mangel-wurzel, and this made the whole thing rather complex and unpleasant.

As I stood looking in the glass, giving myself a final inspection, I couldn't help feeling what a difference a hat makes to a man.

Bare-headed, I was perfect in every detail; but with a hat on I looked a good deal like a bloke about to go on and do a comic song at one of the halls. Still, there it was, and it was no good worrying about it. I put the trousers under the mattress, to ensure an adequate crease; and I rang the bell for Mrs. Beale and gave her the coat to press with a hot iron. I also gave her the hat and instructed her to rub stout on it. This, as you doubtless know, gives a topper the deuce of a gloss; and when a fellow is up against a Bart, he can't afford to neglect the smallest detail.

And so to bed.

I didn't sleep very well. At about one in the morning it started to rain in buckets, and the thought suddenly struck me: what the deuce was I going to do if it rained during the day? To buy an umbrella would simply dislocate the budget beyond repair. The consequence was that I tossed pretty restlessly on my pillow.

But all was well. When I woke at eight o'clock the sun was pouring into the room, and the last snag seemed to have been removed from my path. I had breakfast, and then I dug the trouserings out from under the mattress, slipped into them, put on the shoes, buckled the spats, and rang the bell for Mrs. Beale. I was feeling debonair to a degree. The crease in the trousers was perfect.

"Oh, Mrs. Beale," I said. "The coat and the hat, please. What a lovely morning!"

Now, this Beale woman, I must tell you, was a slightly sinister sort of female, with eyes that reminded me a good deal of my Aunt Julia. And I was now somewhat rattled to perceive that she was looking at me in a rather meaning kind of manner. I also perceived that she held in her hand a paper or document. And there shot through me, Corky, a nameless fear.

It's a kind of instinct, I suppose. A man who has been up against it as frequently as I have comes to shudder automatically when he sees a landlady holding a sheet of paper and looking at him in a meaning manner.

A moment later it was plain that my sixth sense had not deceived me.

"I've brought your little account, Mr. Ukridge," said this fearful female.

"Right!" I said, heartily. "Just shove it on the table, will you? And bring the coat and hat."

She looked more like my Aunt Julia than ever.

"I must ask you for the money now," she said. "Being a week overdue."

All this was taking the sunshine out of the morning, but I remained debonair.

"Yes, yes," I said. "I quite understand. We'll have a good long talk about that later. The hat and coat, please, Mrs. Beale."

"I must ask you——" she was beginning again, but I checked her with one of my looks. If there's one thing I bar in this world, Corky, it's sordidness.

"Yes, yes," I said testily. "Some other time. I want the hat and coat, please."

At this moment, by the greatest bad luck, her vampire gaze fell on the mantelpiece. You know how it is when you are dressing with unusual care—you fill your pockets last thing. And I had most unfortunately placed my little capital on the mantelpiece. Too late I saw that she had spotted it. Take the advice of a man who has seen something of life, Corky, and never leave your money lying about. It's bound to start a disagreeable train of thought in the mind of anyone who sees it.

"You've got the money there," said Mrs. Beale.

I leaped for the mantelpiece and trousered the cash.

"No, no," I said, hastily. "You can't have that. I need that."

"Ho?" she said. "So do I."

"Now listen, Mrs. Beale," I said. "You know as well as I do——"

"I know as well as you do that you owe me two pounds three and sixpence ha'penny."

"And in God's good time," I said, "you shall have it. But just for the moment you must be patient. Why, dash it, Mrs. Beale," I said warmly, "you know as well as I do that in all financial transactions a certain amount of credit is an understood thing. Credit is the lifeblood of commerce. So bring the hat and coat, and later on we will thresh this matter out thoroughly."

And then this woman showed a baseness of soul, a horrible low cunning, which, I like to think, is rarely seen in the female sex.

"I'll either have the money," she said, "or I'll keep the coat and hat." And words cannot express, Corky, the hideous malignity in her voice. "They ought to fetch a bit."

I stared at her, appalled.

"But I can't go to Ascot without a top-hat."

"Then you'd better not go to Ascot."

"Be reasonable!" I begged. "Reflect!"

It was no good. She stood firm on her demand for two pounds three and sixpence ha'penny, and nothing that I could say would shift her. I offered her double the sum at some future date, but no business was done. The curse of landladies as a class, Corky, and the reason why they never rise to ease and opulence, is that they have no vision. They do not understand high finance. They lack the big, broad, flexible outlook which wins to wealth. The deadlock continued, and finally she went off, leaving me dished once more.

It is only when you are in a situation like that, Corky, that you really begin to be able to appreciate the true hollowness of the world. It is only then that the absolute silliness and futility of human institutions comes home to you. This Ascot business, for instance. Why in the name of Heaven, if you are going to hold a race meeting, should you make a foolish regulation about the sort of costume people must wear if they want to attend it? Why should it be necessary to wear a top-hat at Ascot, when you can go to all the other races in anything you like?

Here was I, perfectly equipped for Hurst Park, Sandown, Gatwick, Ally Pally, Lingfield, or any other meeting you care to name; and, simply because a ghoul of a landlady had pinched my topper, I was utterly debarred from going to Ascot, though the price of admission was bulging in my pocket. It's just that sort of thing that makes a fellow chafe at our modern civilization and wonder if, after all, Man can be Nature's last word.

Such, Corky, were my meditations as I stood at the window and gazed bleakly out at the sunshine. And then suddenly, as I gazed, I observed a bloke approaching up the street.

I eyed him with interest. He was an elderly, prosperous bloke with a yellowish face and a white moustache, and he was looking at the numbers on the doors, as if he were trying to spot a destination. And at this moment he halted outside the front door of my house, squinted up at the number, and then trotted up the steps and rang the bell. And I realized at once that this must be Tuppy's secretary man, the fellow I was due to go and see at the club in another half-hour. For a moment it seemed odd that he should have come to call on me instead of waiting for me to call on him; and then I reflected that this was just the sort of thing that the energetic, world's-worker type of man that Tuppy

chummed up with at his club would be likely to do. Time is money with these coves, and no doubt he had remembered some other appointment which he couldn't make if he waited at his club till ten.

Anyway, here he was, and I peered down at him with a beating heart. For what sent a thrill through me, Corky, was the fact that he was much about my build and was brightly clad in correct morning costume with top-hat complete. And though it was hard to tell exactly at such a distance and elevation, the thought flashed across me like an inspiration from above that that top-hat would fit me a dashed sight better than Tuppy's had done.

In another minute there was a knock on the door, and he came in.

Seeing him at close range, I perceived that I had not misjudged this man. He was shortish, but his shoulders were just about the same size as mine, and his head was large and round. If ever, in a word, a bloke might have been designed by Providence to wear a coat and hat that would fit me, this bloke was that bloke. I gazed at him with a gleaming eye.

"Mr. Ukridge?"

"Yes," I said. "Come in. Awfully good of you to call."

"Not at all."

And now, Corky, as you will no doubt have divined, I was, so to speak, at the cross-roads. The finger-post of Prudence pointed one way, that of Love another. Prudence whispered to me to conciliate this bloke, to speak him fair, to comport myself towards him as towards one who held my destinies in his hand and who could, if well disposed, give me a job which would keep the wolf from the door while I was looking round for something bigger and more attuned to my vision and abilities.

Love, on the other hand, was shouting to me to pinch his coat and leg it for the open spaces.

It was the deuce of a dilemma.

"I have called——" began the bloke.

I made up my mind. Love got the decision.

"I say," I said. "I think you've got something on the back of your coat."

"Eh?" said the bloke, trying to squint round and look between his shoulder-blades—silly ass.

"It's a squashed tomato or something."

"A squashed tomato?"

"Or something."

"How would I get a squashed tomato on my coat?"

"Ah!" I said, giving him to understand with a wave of the hand that these were deep matters.

"Very curious," said the bloke.

"Very," I said. "Slip off your hat and let's have a look at it."

He slid out of the coat, and I was on it like a knife. You have to move quick on these occasions, and I moved quick. I had the coat out of his hand and the top-hat off the table where he had put it, and was out of the door and dashing down the stairs before he could utter a yip.

I put on the coat, and it fitted like a glove. I slapped the top-hat on to my head, and it might have been made for me. And then I went out into the sunshine, as natty a specimen as ever paced down Piccadilly.

I was passing down the front steps when I heard a sort of bellow from above. There was the bloke, protruding from the window; and, strong man though I am, Corky, I admit that for an instant I quailed at the sight of the hideous fury that distorted his countenance.

"Come back!" shouted the bloke.

Well, it wasn't a time for standing and making explanations and generally exchanging idle chatter. When a man is leaning out of window in his shirt-sleeves, making the amount of noise that this cove was making, it doesn't take long for a crowd to gather. And my experience has been that, when a crowd gathers, it isn't much longer before some infernal officious policeman rolls round as well. Nothing was farther from my wishes than to have this little purely private affair between the bloke and myself sifted by a policeman in front of a large crowd.

So I didn't linger. I waved my hand as much as to say that all would come right in the future, and then I nipped at a fairly high rate of speed round the corner and hailed a taxi. It had been no part of my plans to incur the expense of a taxi, I having earmarked twopence for a ride on the Tube to Waterloo; but there are times when economy is false prudence.

Once in the cab, whizzing along and putting more distance between the bloke and myself with every revolution of the wheels, I perked up amazingly. I had been, I confess, a trifle apprehensive until now; but from this moment everything seemed splendid. I forgot to mention it before, but this final top-hat which now

nestled so snugly on the brow was a grey top-hat; and, if there is one thing that really lends a zip and a sort of devilish fascination to a fellow's appearance, it is one of those grey toppers. As I looked at myself in the glass and then gazed out of window at the gay sunshine, it seemed to me that God was in His Heaven and all was right with the world.

The general excellence of things continued. I had a pleasant journey; and when I got to Ascot I planked my ten bob on a horse I heard some fellows talking about in the train, and, by Jove, it ambled home at a crisp ten to one. So there I was, five quid ahead of the game almost, you might say, before I had got there. It was with an uplifted heart, Corky, that I strolled off to the paddock to have a look at the multitude and try to find Mabel. And I had hardly emerged from that tunnel thing that you have to walk through to get from the stand to the paddock when I ran into old Tuppy.

My first feeling on observing the dear old chap was one of relief that I wasn't wearing his hat. Old Tuppy is one of the best, but little things are apt to upset him, and I was in no mood for a painful scene. I passed the time of day genially.

"Ah, Tuppy!" I said.

George Tupper is a man with a heart of gold, but he is deficient in tact.

"How the deuce did you get here?" he asked.

"In the ordinary way, laddie," I said.

"I mean, what are you doing here, dressed up to the nines like this?"

"Naturally," I replied, with a touch of stiffness, "when I come to Ascot, I wear the accepted morning costume of the well-dressed Englishman."

"You look as if you had come into a fortune."

"Yes?" I said, rather wishing he would change the subject. In spite of what you might call the perfect *alibi* of the grey topper, I did not want to discuss hats and clothes with Tuppy so soon after his recent bereavement. I could see that the hat he had on was a brand-new one and must have set him back at least a couple of quid.

"I suppose you've gone back to your aunt?" said Tuppy, jumping at a plausible solution. "Well, I'm awfully glad, old man, because I'm afraid that secretary job is off. I was going to write to you to-night."

"Off?" I said. Having had the advantage of seeing the bloke's face as he hung out of window at the moment of our parting, I knew it was off; but I couldn't see how Tuppy could know.

"He rang me up last night, to tell me that he was afraid you wouldn't do, as he had thought it over and decided that he must have a secretary who knew shorthand."

"Oh?" I said. "Oh, did he? Then I'm dashed glad," I said warmly, "that I pinched his hat. It will be a sharp lesson to him not to raise people's hopes and shilly-shally in this manner."

"Pinched his hat? What do you mean?"

I perceived that there was need for caution. Tuppy was looking at me in an odd manner, and I could see that the turn the conversation had taken was once more wakening in him suspicions which he ought to have known better than to entertain of an old school friend.

"It was like this, Tuppy," I said. "When you came to me and told me about that international spy sneaking your hat from the Foreign Office, it gave me an idea. I had been wanting to come to Ascot, but I had no topper. Of course, if I had pinched yours, as you imagined for a moment I had done, I should have had one; but, not having pinched yours, of course I hadn't one. So when your friend Bulstrode called on me this morning I collared his. And now that you have revealed to me what a fickle, changeable character he is, I'm very glad I did."

Tuppy gaped slightly.

"Bulstrode called on you this morning, did you say?"

"This morning at about half-past nine."

"He couldn't have done."

"Then how do you account for my having his hat? Pull yourself together, Tuppy, old horse."

"The man who came to see you couldn't have been Bulstrode."

"Why not?"

"He left for Paris last night."

"What!"

"He 'phoned me from the station just before his train started. He had had to change his plans."

"Then who was the bloke?" I said.

The thing seemed to me to have the makings of one of those great historic mysteries you read about. I saw no reason why posterity should not discuss for ever the problem of the bloke

in the grey topper as keenly as they do the man in the iron mask. "The facts," I said, "are precisely as I have stated. At nine-thirty this morning a bird, gaily apparelled in morning coat, spongebag trousers, and grey top-hat, presented himself at my rooms and——"

At this moment a voice spoke behind me.

"Oh, hullo!"

I turned, and observed the Bart.

"Hullo!" I said.

I introduced Tuppy. The Bart nodded courteously.

"I say," said the Bart. "Where's the old man?"

"What old man?"

"Mabel's father. Didn't he catch you?"

I stared at the man. He appeared to me to be gibbering. And a gibbering Bart is a nasty thing to have hanging about you before you have strengthened yourself with a bit of lunch.

"Mabel's father's in Singapore," I said.

"No, he isn't," said the Bart. "He got home yesterday, and Mabel sent him round to your place to pick you up and bring you down here in the car. Had you left before he arrived?"

Well, that's where the story ends, Corky. From the moment that pimply Baronet uttered those words, you might say that I faded out of the picture. I never went near Onslow Square again. Nobody can say that I lack nerve, but I hadn't nerve enough to creep into the family circle and resume acquaintance with that fearsome bloke. There are some men, no doubt, with whom I might have been able to pass the whole thing off with a light laugh, but that glimpse I had had of him as he bellowed out of the window told me that he was not one of them. I faded away, Corky, old horse, just faded away. And about a couple of months later I read in the paper that Mabel had married the Bart.

Ukridge sighed another sigh and heaved himself up from the sofa. Outside the world was blue-grey with the growing dawn, and even the later birds were busy among the worms.

"You might make a story out of that, Corky," said Ukridge.

"I might," I said.

"All profits to be shared on a strict fifty-fifty basis, of course."

"Of course."

Ukridge brooded.

"Though it really wants a bigger man to do it justice and tell it properly, bringing out all the fine shades of the tragedy. It

wants somebody like Thomas Hardy or Kipling, or somebody."

"Better let me have a shot at it."

"All right," said Ukridge. "And, as regards a title, I should call it 'His Lost Romance', or something like that. Or would you suggest simply something terse and telling, like 'Fate' or 'Destiny'?"

"I'll think of a title," I said.

8

Buttercup Day

"LADDIE," said Ukridge, "I need capital, old horse—need it sorely."

He removed his glistening silk hat, looked at it in a puzzled way, and replaced it on his head. We had met by chance near the eastern end of Piccadilly, and that breath-taking gorgeousness of his costume told me that, since I had seen him last, there must have occurred between him and his Aunt Julia one of those periodical reconciliations which were wont to punctuate his hectic and disreputable career. For those who know Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge, that much-enduring man, are aware that he is the nephew of Miss Julia Ukridge, the wealthy and popular novelist, and that from time to time, when she can bring herself to forgive and let bygones by bygones, he goes to dwell for a while in gilded servitude at her house in Wimbledon.

"Yes, Corky, my boy, I want a bit of capital."

"Oh?"

"And want it quick. The truest saying in this world is that you can't accumulate if you don't speculate. But how the deuce are you to start speculating unless you accumulate a few quid to begin with?"

"Ah," I said non-committally.

"Take my case," proceeded Ukridge, running a large, beautifully gloved finger round the inside of a spotless collar which appeared to fit a trifle too snugly to the neck. "I have an absolutely safe double for Kempton Park on the fifteenth, and even a modest investment would bring me in several hundred pounds. But bookies, blast them, require cash down in advance, so where am I? Without capital, enterprise is strangled at birth."

"Can't you get some from your aunt?"

"Not a cent. She is one of those women who simply do not disgorge. All her surplus cash is devoted to adding to her collection of mouldy snuff-boxes. When I look at those snuff-boxes and reflect that any single one of them, judiciously put up the

spout, would set my feet on the road to Fortune, only my innate sense of honesty keeps me from pinching them."

"You mean they're locked up?"

"It's hard, laddie. Very hard and bitter and ironical. She buys me suits. She buys me hats. She buys me boots. She buys me spats. And, what is more, insists on my wearing the damned things. With what result? Not only am I infernally uncomfortable but my exterior creates a totally false impression in the minds of any blokes I meet to whom I may happen to owe a bit of money. When I go about looking as if I owned the Mint, it becomes difficult to convince them that I am not in a position to pay them their beastly one pound fourteen and eleven, or whatever it is. I tell you, laddie, the strain has begun to weigh upon me to such an extent that the breaking-point may arrive at any moment. Every day it is becoming more imperative that I clear out and start life again upon my own. But this cannot be done without cash. And that is why I look around me and say to myself: 'How am I to acquire a bit of capital?' "

I thought it best to observe at this point that my own circumstances were extremely straitened. Ukridge received the information with a sad, indulgent smile.

"I was not dreaming of biting your ear, old horse," he said. "What I require is something far beyond your power to supply. Five pounds at least. Or three, anyway. Of course, if, before we part, you think fit to hand over a couple of bob or half-a-crown as a small temporary——"

He broke off with a start, and there came into his face the look of one who has perceived snakes in his path. He gazed along the street; then, wheeling round, hurried abruptly down Church Place.

"One of your creditors?" I asked.

"Girl with flags," said Ukridge briefly. A peevish note crept into his voice. "This modern practice, laddie, of allowing females with trays of flags and collecting-boxes to flood the Metropolis is developing into a scourge. If it isn't Rose Day it's Daisy Day, and if it isn't Daisy Day it's Pansy Day. And though now, thanks to a bit of quick thinking, we have managed to escape without ——"

At this moment a second flag-girl, emerging from Jermyn Street, held us up with a brilliant smile, and we gave till it hurt—which, in Ukridge's case, was almost immediately.

"And so it goes on," he said bitterly. "Sixpence here, a shilling there. Only last Friday I was touched for twopence at my very door. How can a man amass a huge fortune if there is this constant drain on his resources? What was that girl collecting for?"

"I didn't notice."

"Nor did I. One never does. For all we know, we may have contributed to some cause of which we heartily disapprove. And that reminds me, Corky, my aunt is lending her grounds on Tuesday for a bazaar in aid of the local Temperance League. I particularly wish you to put aside all other engagements and roll up."

"No, thanks. I don't want to meet your aunt again."

"You won't meet her. She will be away. She's going north on a lecturing tour."

"Well, I don't want to come to any bazaar. I can't afford it."

"Have no fear, laddie. There will be no expense involved. You will pass the entire afternoon in the house with me. My aunt, though she couldn't get out of lending these people her grounds, is scared that, with so many strangers prowling about, somebody might edge in and sneak her snuff-boxes. So I am left on guard, with instructions not to stir out till they've all gone. And a very wise precaution, too. There is absolutely nothing which blokes whose passions have been inflamed by constant ginger-beer will stick at. You will share my vigil. We will smoke a pipe or two in the study, talk of this and that, and it may be that, if we put our heads together, we shall be able to think up a scheme for collecting a bit of capital."

"Oh, well, in that case——"

"I shall rely on you. And now, if I don't want to be late, I'd better be getting along. I'm lunching with my aunt at Prince's."

He gazed malevolently at the flag-girl, who had just stopped another pedestrian, and strode off.

Heath House, Wimbledon, the residence of Miss Julia Ukridge, was one of that row of large mansions which face the Common, standing back from the road in the seclusion of spacious grounds. On any normal day, the prevailing note of the place would have been a dignified calm; but when I arrived on the Tuesday afternoon a vast and unusual activity was in progress. Over the gates there hung large banners advertising the bazaar, and through these gates crowds of people were passing. From somewhere in

the interior of the garden came the brassy music of a merry-go-round. I added myself to the throng, and was making for the front door when a silvery voice spoke in my ear, and I was aware of a very pretty girl at my elbow.

"Buy a buttercup?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Buy a buttercup?"

I then perceived that, attached to her person with a strap, she carried a tray containing a mass of yellow paper objects.

"What's all this?" I inquired, automatically feeling in my pocket.

She beamed upon me like a high priestess initiating some favourite novice into a rite.

"Buttercup Day," she said winningly.

A man of greater strength of mind would, no doubt, have asked what Buttercup Day was, but I have a spine of wax. I produced the first decent-sized coin on which my fumbling fingers rested, and slipped it into her box. She thanked me with a good deal of fervour and pinned one of the yellow objects in my buttonhole.

The interview then terminated. The girl flitted off like a sunbeam in the direction of a prosperous-looking man who had just gone by, and I went on to the house, where I found Ukridge in the study gazing earnestly through the french windows which commanded a view of the grounds. He turned as I entered; and, as his eye fell upon the saffron ornament in my coat, a soft smile of pleasure played about his mouth.

"I see you've got one," he said.

"Got what?"

"One of those thingummies."

"Oh, these? Yes. There was a girl with a tray of them in the front garden. It's Buttercup Day. In aid of something or other, I suppose."

"It's in aid of me," said Ukridge, the soft smile developing into a face-splitting grin.

"What do you mean?"

"Corky, old horse, said Ukridge, motioning me to a chair, "the great thing in this world is to have a good, level business head. Many men in my position wanting capital and not seeing where they were going to get it, would have given up the struggle as a bad job. Why? Because they lacked Vision and the big, broad,

flexible outlook. But what did I do? I sat down and thought. And after many hours of concentrated meditation I was rewarded with an idea. You remember that painful affair in Jermyn Street the other day—when that female bandit got into our ribs? You recall that neither of us knew what we had coughed up our good money for?"

"Well?"

"Well, laddie, it suddenly flashed upon me like an inspiration from above that nobody ever does know what they are coughing up for when they meet a girl with a tray of flags. I hit upon the great truth, old horse—one of the profoundest truths in this modern civilization of ours—that any given man, confronted by a pretty girl with a tray of flags, will automatically and without inquiry shove a coin in her box. So I got hold of a girl I know—a dear little soul, full of beans—and arranged for her to come here this afternoon. I confidently anticipate a clean-up on an impressive scale. The outlay on the pins and bits of paper was practically nil, so there is no overhead and all that comes in will be pure velvet."

A strong pang shot through me.

"Do you mean to say," I demanded with feeling, "that that half-crown of mine goes into your beastly pocket?"

"Half of it. Naturally my colleague and partner is in on the division. Did you really give half-a-crown?" said Ukridge, pleased. "It was like you, laddie. Generous to a fault. If everyone had your lavish disposition, this world would be a better, sweeter place."

"I suppose you realize," I said, "that in about ten minutes at the outside your colleague and partner, as you call her, will be arrested for obtaining money under false pretences?"

"Not a chance."

"After which, they will—thank God!—proceed to pinch you."

"Quite impossible, laddie. I rely on my knowledge of human psychology. What did she say when she stung you?"

"I forget. 'Buy a buttercup' or something."

"And then?"

"Then I asked what it was all about, and she said, 'Buttercup Day'."

"Exactly. And that's all she will need to say to anyone. Is it likely, is it reasonable to suppose, that even in these materialistic days Chivalry has sunk so low that any man will require to be

told more, by a girl as pretty as that, than that it is Buttercup Day?" He walked to the window and looked out. "Ah! She's come round into the back garden," he said, with satisfaction. "She seems to be doing a roaring trade. Every second man is wearing a buttercup. She is now putting it across a curate, bless her heart."

"And in a couple of minutes she will probably try to put it across a plain-clothes detective, and that will be the end."

Ukridge eyed me reproachfully.

"You persist in looking on the gloomy side, Corky. A little more of the congratulatory attitude is what I could wish to see in you, laddie. You do not appear to realize that your old friend's foot is at last on the ladder that leads to wealth. Suppose—putting it at the lowest figure—I net four pounds out of this buttercup business. It goes on Caterpillar in the two o'clock selling race at Kempton. Caterpillar wins, the odds being—let us say—ten to one. Stake and winnings go on Bismuth for the Jubilee Cup, again at ten to one. There you have a nice, clean four hundred pounds of capital, ample for a man of keen business sense to build a fortune on. For, between ourselves, Corky, I have my eye on what looks like the investment of a lifetime."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I was reading about it the other day. A cat ranch out in America."

"A cat ranch?"

That's it. You collect a hundred thousand cats. Each cat has twelve kittens a year. The skins range from ten cents each for the white ones to seventy-five for the pure black. That gives you twelve million skins per year to sell at an average price of thirty cents per skin, making your annual revenue at a conservative estimate three hundred and sixty thousand dollars. But, you will say, what about overhead expenses?"

"Will I?"

"That has all been allowed for. To feed the cats you start a rat ranch next door. The rats multiply four times as fast as cats, so if you begin with a million rats it gives you four rats per day per cat, which is plenty. You feed the rats on what is left over of the cats after removing the skins, allowing one-fourth of a cat per rat, the business thus becoming automatically self-supporting. The cats will eat the rats, the rats will eat the cats——"

There was a knock upon the door.

"Come in," bellowed Ukridge irritably. These captains of industry hate to be interrupted when in conference.

It was the butler who had broken in upon his statistics.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," said he.

"Who is he?"

"He did not give his name, sir. He is a gentleman in Holy Orders."

"Not the vicar?" cried Ukridge in alarm.

"No, sir. The gentleman is a curate. He inquired for Miss Ukridge. I informed him that Miss Ukridge was absent, but that you were on the premises, and he then desired to see you, sir."

"Oh, all right," said Ukridge resignedly. "Show him in. Though we are running grave risks, Corky," he added, as the door closed. "These curates frequently have subscription lists up their sleeves and are extremely apt, unless you are very firm, to soak you for a donation to the Church Organ Fund or something. Still, let us hope——"

The door opened, and our visitor entered. He was a rather small size in curates, with an engaging, ingenuous face, adorned with a pair of pince-nez. He wore a paper buttercup in his coat; and, directly he began to speak, revealed himself as the possessor of a peculiar stammer.

"Pup-pup-pup——" he said.

"Eh?" said Ukridge.

"Mr. pup-pup-pup Ukridge?"

"Yes. This is my friend, Mr. Corcoran."

I bowed. The curate bowed.

"Take a seat," urged Ukridge hospitably. "You'll have a drink?"

The visitor raised a deprecatory hand.

"No, thank you," he replied. "I find it more beneficial to my health to abstain entirely from alcoholic liquids. At the University I was a moderate drinker, but since I came down I have found it better to pup-pup-pup completely. But pray do not let me stop you. I am no bigot."

He beamed for an instant in friendly fashion; then there came into his face a look of gravity. Here was a man, one perceived, who had something on his mind.

"I came here, Mr. Ukridge," he said, "on a pup-pup-pup-pup-pup——"

"Parish matter?" I hazarded, to help him out.

He shook his head.

"No, a pup-pup-pup——"

"Pleasure-trip?" suggested Ukridge.

He shook his head again.

"No, a pup-pup-pup uncongenial errand. I understand that Miss Ukridge is absent and that you, as her nephew, are, therefore, the presiding genius, if I may use the expression, of these pup-pup-pup festivities."

"Eh?" said Ukridge, fogged.

"I mean that it is to you that complaints should be made."

"Complaints?"

"Of what is going on in Miss Ukridge's garden—one might say under her imprimatur."

Ukridge's classical education had been cut short by the fact that at an early age he had unfortunately been expelled from the school of which in boyhood's days we had been fellow-members, and Latin small-talk was not his forte. This one passed well over his head. He looked at me plaintively, and I translated.

"He means," I said, "that your aunt lent her grounds for this binge and so has a right to early information about any rough stuff that is being pulled on the premises."

"Exactly," said the curate.

"But, dash it, laddie," rotested Ukridge, now abreast of the situation, "it's no good complaining of anything that happens at a charity bazaar. You know as well as I do that, when the members of a Temperance League get together and start selling things at stalls, anything goes except gouging and biting. The only thing to do is to be light on your feet and keep away."

The curate shook his head sadly.

"I have no complaint to make concerning the manner in which the stalls are being conducted, Mr. pup-pup-pup. It is only to be expected that at a bazaar in aid of a deserving cause the prices of the various articles on sale will be in excess of those charged in the ordinary marts of trade. But deliberate and calculated swindling is another matter."

"Swindling?"

"There is a young woman in the grounds extorting money from the public on the plea that it is Buttercup Day. And here is the point, Mr. Ukridge. Buttercup Day is the flag-day of the National Orthopaedic Institute, and is not to take place for some

weeks. This young person is deliberately cheating the public."

Ukridge licked his lips, with a hunted expression.

"Probably a local institution of the same name," I suggested.

"That's it," said Ukridge gratefully. "Just what I was going to say myself. Probably a local institution. Fresh Air Fund for the poor of the neighbourhood, I shouldn't wonder. I believe I've heard them talk about it, now I come to think."

The curate refused to consider the theory.

"No," he said."If that had been so the young woman would have informed me. In answer to my questions, her manner was evasive and I could elicit no satisfactory reply. She merely smiled and repeated the words 'Buttercup Day'. I feel that the police should be called in."

"The police!" gurgled Ukridge pallidly.

"It is our pup-pup duty," said the curate, looking like a man who writes letters to the Press signed "Pro Bono Publico".

Ukridge shot out of his chair with a convulsive bound. He grasped my arm and led me to the door.

"Excuse me," he said. "Corky," he whispered tensely, dragging me out into the passage, "go and tell her to leg it—quick!"

"Right!" I said.

"You will no doubt find a constable in the road," roared Ukridge.

"I bet I will," I replied in a clear, carrying voice.

"We can't have this sort of thing going on here," bellowed Ukridge.

"Certainly not," I shouted with enthusiasm.

He returned to the study, and I went forth upon my errand of mercy. I had reached the front door and was about to open it, when it suddenly opened itself, and the next moment I was gazing into the clear blue eyes of Ukridge's Aunt Julia.

"Oh—ah—er!" I said.

There are certain people in this world in whose presence certain other people can never feel completely at their ease. Notable among the people beneath whose gaze I myself experience a sensation of extreme discomfort and guilt is Miss Julia Ukridge, author of so many widely-read novels, and popular after-dinner speaker at the better class of literary reunion. This was the fourth time we had met, and on each of the previous occasions I had felt the same curious illusion of having just committed some particularly unsavoury crime and—what is more—of having done

it with swollen hands, enlarged feet, and trousers bagging at the knee on a morning when I had omitted to shave.

I stood and gaped. Although she had no doubt made her entry by the simple process of inserting a latchkey in the front door and turning it, her abrupt appearance had on me the effect of a miracle.

"Mr. Corcoran!" she observed, without pleasure.

"Er——"

"What are you doing here?"

An inhospitable remark; but justified, perhaps, by the circumstances of our previous relations—which had not been of the most agreeable.

"I came to see—er—Stanley."

"Oh?"

"He wanted me with him this afternoon."

"Indeed?" she said; and her manner suggested surprise at what she evidently considered a strange and even morbid taste on her nephew's part.

"We thought—we thought—we both thought you were lecturing up north."

"When I arrived at the club for luncheon I found a telegram postponing my visit," she condescended to explain. "Where is Stanley?"

"In your study."

"I will go there. I wish to see him."

I began to feel like Horatius at the Bridge. It seemed to me that, foe of the human race though Ukridge was in so many respects, it was my duty as a lifelong friend to prevent this woman winning through to him until the curate was well out of the way. I have a great belief in woman's intuition, and I was convinced that, should Miss Julia Ukridge learn that there was a girl in her grounds selling paper buttercups for a non-existent charity, her keen intelligence would leap without the slightest hesitation to the fact of her nephew's complicity in the disgraceful affair. She had had previous experience of Ukridge's financial methods.

In this crisis I thought rapidly.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "It nearly slipped my mind. The—er—the man in charge of all this business told me he particularly wanted to see you directly you came back."

"What do you mean by the man in charge of all this business?"

"The fellow who got up the bazaar, you know."

"Do you mean Mr. Sims, the president of the Temperance League?"

"That's right. He told me he wanted to see you."

"How could he possibly know that I should be coming back?"

"Oh, in case you did, I mean." I had what Ukridge would have called an inspiration from above. "I think he wants you to say a few words."

I doubt if anything else would have shifted her. There came into her eyes, softening their steely glitter for a moment, that strange light which is seen only in the eyes of confirmed public speakers who are asked to say a few words.

"Well, I will go and see him."

She turned away, and I bounded back to the study. The advent of the mistress of the house had materially altered my plans for the afternoon. What I proposed to do now was to inform Ukridge of her arrival, advise him to eject the curate with all possible speed, give him my blessing, and then slide quietly and unostentatiously away, without any further formalities of farewell. I am not unduly sensitive, but there had been that in Miss Ukridge's manner at our recent meeting which told me that I was not her ideal guest.

I entered the study. The curate was gone, and Ukridge, breathing heavily, was fast asleep in an arm-chair.

The disappearance of the curate puzzled me for a moment. He was rather an insignificant little man, but not so insignificant that I would not have noticed him if he had passed me while I was standing at the front door. And then I saw that the french windows were open.

It seemed to me that there was nothing to keep me. The strong distaste for this house which I had never lost since my first entry into it had been growing, and now the great open spaces called to me with an imperious voice. I turned softly, and found my hostess standing in the doorway.

"Oh, ah!" I said; and once more was afflicted by that curious sensation of having swelled in a very loathsome manner about the hands and feet. I have observed my hands from time to time during my life and have never been struck by anything particularly hideous about them: but whenever I encounter Miss Julia Ukridge they invariably take on the appearance and proportions of uncooked hams.

"Did you tell me, Mr. Corcoran," said the woman in that quiet, purring voice which must lose her so many friends, not only in

Wimbledon but in the larger world outside, "that you saw Mr. Sims and he said that he wished to speak to me?"

"That's right."

"Curious," said Miss Ukridge. "I find that Mr. Sims is confined to his bed with a chill and has not been here today."

I could sympathize with Mr. Sims's chills. I felt as if I had caught one myself. I would—possibly—have made some reply, but at this moment an enormous snore proceeded from the armchair behind me, and such was my overwrought condition that I leapt like a young ram.

"Stanley!" cried Miss Ukridge, sighting the chair.

Another snore rumbled through the air, competing with the music of the merry-go-round. Miss Ukridge advanced and shook her nephew's arm.

"I think," I said, being in the frame of mind when one does say silly things of that sort, "I think he's asleep."

"Asleep!" said Miss Ukridge briefly. Her eye fell on the half-empty glass on the table, and she shuddered austerely.

The interpretation which she obviously placed on the matter seemed incredible to me. On the stage and in motion-pictures one frequently sees victims of drink keel over in a state of complete unconsciousness after a single glass, but Ukridge was surely of sterner stuff.

"I can't understand it," I said.

"Indeed!" said Miss Ukridge.

"Why, I have only been out of the room half a minute, and when I left him he was talking to a curate."

"A curate?"

"Absolutely a curate. It's hardly likely, is it, that when he was talking to a curate he would——"

My speech for the defence was cut short by a sudden, sharp noise which, proceeding from immediately behind me, caused me once more to quiver convulsively.

"Well, sir?" said Miss Ukridge.

She was looking past me; and, turning, I perceived that a stranger had joined us. He was standing in the french windows, and the noise which had startled me had apprently been caused by him rapping on the glass with the knob of a stick.

"Miss Ukridge?" said the newcomer.

He was one of those hard-faced, keen-eyed men. There clung

about him, as he advanced into the room, a subtle air of authority. That he was a man of character and resolution was proved by the fact that he met Miss Ukridge's eye without a tremor.

"I am Miss Ukridge. Might I inquire——"

The visitor looked harder-faced and more keen-eyed than ever.

"My name is Dawson. From the Yard."

"What yard?" asked the lady of the house, who, it seemed, did not read detective stories.

"Scotland Yard!"

"Oh!"

"I have come to warn you, Miss Ukridge," said Mr. Dawson, looking at me as if I were a bloodstain, "to be on your guard. One of the greatest rascals in the profession is hanging about your grounds."

"Then why don't you arrest him?" demanded Miss Ukridge.

The visitor smiled faintly.

"Because I want to get him good," he said.

"Get him good? Do you mean reform him?"

"I do not mean reform him," said Mr. Dawson, grimly. "I mean that I want to catch him trying on something worth pulling him in for. There's no sense in taking a man like Stuttering Sam for being a suspected person."

"Stuttering Sam!" I cried, and Mr. Dawson eyed me keenly once more, this time almost as intently as if I had been the blunt instrument with which the murder was committed.

"Eh?" he said.

"Oh, nothing. Only it's curious——"

"What's curious?"

"Oh, no, it couldn't be. This fellow was a curate. A most respectable man."

"Have you seen a curate who stuttered?" exclaimed Mr. Dawson.

"Why, yes. He——"

"Hullo!" said Mr. Dawson. "Who's this?"

"That," replied Miss Ukridge, eyeing the arm-chair with loathing, "is my nephew Stanley."

"Sound sleeper."

"I prefer not to talk about him."

"Tell me about this curate," said Mr. Dawson brusquely.

"Well, he came in——"

"Came in? In here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well——"

"He must have had some story. What was it?"

I thought it judicious, in the interests of my sleeping friend, to depart somewhat from the precise truth.

"He—er—I think he said something about being interested in Miss Ukridge's collection of snuff-boxes."

"Have you a collection of snuff-boxes, Miss Ukridge?"

"Yes."

"Where do you keep them?"

'In the drawing-room."

"Take me there, if you please."

"But I don't understand."

Mr. Dawson clicked his tongue in an annoyed manner. He seemed to be an irritable sleuth-hound.

"I should have thought the thing was clear enough by this time. This man worms his way into your house with a plausible story, gets rid of this gentleman here—— How did he get rid of you?"

"Oh, I just went, you know. I thought I would like a stroll."

"Oh? Well, having contrived to be alone with your nephew, Miss Ukridge, he slips knock-out drops in his drink——"

"Knock-out drops?"

"A drug of some kind," explained Mr. Dawson, chafing at her slowness of intelligence.

"But the man was a curate!"

Mr. Dawson barked shortly.

"Posing as a curate is the thing Stuttering Sam does best. He works the races in that character. Is this the drawing-room?"

It was. And it did not need the sharp, agonized cry which proceeded from its owner's lips to tell us that the worst had happened. The floor was covered with splintered wood and broken glass.

"They've gone!" cried Miss Ukridge.

It is curious how differently the same phenomenon can strike different people. Miss Ukridge was a frozen statue of grief. Mr. Dawson, on the other hand, seemed pleased. He stroked his short moustache with an air of indulgent complacency, and spoke of neat jobs. He described Stuttering Sam as a Tough Baby, and gave it as his opinion that the absent one might justly be

considered one of the lads and not the worst of them.

"What shall I do?" wailed Miss Ukridge. I was sorry for the woman. I did not like her, but she was suffering.

"The first thing to do," said Mr. Dawson briskly, "is to find how much the fellow has got away with. Have you any other valuables in the house?"

"My jewels are in my bedroom."

"Where?"

"I keep them in a box in the dress-cupboard."

"Well, it's hardly likely that he would find them there, but I'd better go and see. You be taking a look round in here and make a complete list of what has been solen."

"All my snuff-boxes are gone."

"Well, see if there is anything else missing. Where is your bedroom?"

"On the first floor, facing the front."

"Right."

Mr. Dawson, all briskness and efficiency, left us. I was sorry to see him go. I had an idea that it would not be pleasant being left alone with this bereaved woman. Nor was it.

"Why on earth," said Miss Ukridge, rounding on me as if I had been a relation, "did you not suspect this man when he came in?"

"Why, I—he——"

"A child ought to have been able to tell that he was not a real curate."

"He seemed——"

"Seemed!" She wandered restlessly about the room, and suddenly a sharp cry proceeded from her. "My jade Buddha!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That scoundrel has stolen my jade Buddha. Go and tell the detective."

"Certainly."

"Go on! What are you waiting for?"

I fumbled at the handle.

"I don't seem able to get the door open," I explained meekly.

"Tchah!" said Miss Ukridge, swooping down. One of the rooted convictions of each member of the human race is that he or she is able without difficulty to open a door which has baffled their fellows. She took the handle and gave it a vigorous tug. The door creaked but remained unresponsive.

"What's the matter with the thing?" exclaimed Miss Ukridge petulantly.

"It's stuck."

"I know it has stuck. Please do something at once. Good gracious, Mr. Corcoran, surely you are at least able to open a drawing-room door?"

It seemed, put in that tone of voice, a feat sufficiently modest for a man of good physique and fair general education; but I was reluctantly compelled to confess, after a few more experiments, that it was beyond my powers. This appeared to confirm my hostess in the opinion, long held by her, that I was about the most miserable worm that an inscrutable Providence had ever permitted to enter the world.

She did not actually say as much, but she sniffed, and I interpreted her meaning exactly.

"Ring the bell!"

I rang the bell.

"Ring it again!"

I rang it again.

"Shout!"

I shouted.

"Go on shouting!"

I went on shouting. I was in good voice that day. I shouted "Hi!"; I shouted "Here!"; I shouted "Help!"; I also shouted in a broad, general way. It was a performance which should have received more than a word of grateful thanks. But all Miss Ukridge said, when I paused for breath, was:

"Don't whisper!"

I nursed my aching vocal cords in a wounded silence.

"Help!" cried Miss Ukridge.

Considered as a shout, it was not in the same class as mine. It lacked body, vim, and even timbre. But, by that curious irony which governs human affairs, it produced results. Outside the door a thick voice spoke in answer.

"What's up?"

"Open this door!"

The handle rattled.

"It's stuck," said a voice, which I now recognized as that of my old friend, Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge.

"I know it has stuck. Is that you, Stanley? See what is causing it to stick."

A moment of silence followed. Investigations were apparently in progress without.

"There's a wedge jammed under it."

"Well, take it out at once."

"I'll have to get a knife or something."

Another interval for rest and meditation succeeded. Miss Ukridge paced the floor with knit brows; while I sidled into a corner and stood there feeling a little like an inexperienced young animal-trainer who has managed to get himself locked into the lions' den and is trying to remember what Lesson Three of his correspondence course said he ought to do in such circumstances.

Footsteps sounded outside, and then a wrenching and scratching. The door opened and we beheld on the mat Ukridge, with a carving-knife in his hand, looking headachy and dishevelled, and the butler, his professional poise rudely disturbed and his face stained with coal-dust.

It was characteristic of Miss Ukridge that it was to the erring domestic rather than the rescuing nephew that she turned first.

"Barter," she hissed, as far as a woman, even of her intellectual gifts, is capable of hissing the word "Barter", "why didn't you come when I rang?"

"I did not hear the bell, madam. I was——"

"You must have heard the bell."

"No, madam."

"Why not?"

"Because I was in the coal-cellar, madam."

"What on earth were you doing in the coal-cellar?"

"I was induced to go there, madam, by a man. He intimidated me with a pistol. He then locked me in."

"What! What man?"

"A person with a short moustache and penetrating eyes. He——"

A raconteur with a story as interesting as his to tell might reasonably have expected to be allowed to finish it, but butler Barter at this point ceased to grip his audience. With a gasping moan his employer leaped past him, and we heard her running up the stairs.

Ukridge turned to me plaintively.

"What is all this, laddie? Gosh, I've got a headache. What has been happening?"

"The curate put knock-out drops in your drink, and then——"

I have seldom seen anyone display such poignant emotion as Ukridge did at that moment.

"The curate! It's a little hard. Upon my Sam, it's a trifle thick. Corky, old horse, I have travelled all over the world in tramp-steamers and what not. I have drunk in waterfront saloons from Montevideo to Cardiff. And the only time anyone has ever succeeding in doctoring the stuff on me it was done in Wimbledon—and by a curate. Tell me, laddie, are all curates like that? Because, if so——"

"He has also pinched your aunt's collection of snuff-boxes."

"The curate?"

"Yes."

"Golly!" said Ukridge in a low, reverent voice, and I could see a new respect for the Cloth dawning within him.

"And then this other fellow came along—his accomplice, pretending to be a detective—and locked us in and shut the butler in the coal-cellar. And I rather fancy he has got away with your aunt's jewels."

A piercing scream from above rent the air.

"He has," I said briefly. "Well, old man, I think I'll be going."

"Corky," said Ukridge, "stand by me!"

I shook my head.

"In any reasonable circumstances, yes. But I will not meet your aunt again just now. In a year or so, perhaps, but not now."

Hurrying footsteps sounded on the staircase.

"Good-bye," I said, pushing past and heading for the open. "I must be off. Thanks for a very pleasant afternoon."

Money was tight in those days, but it seemed to me next morning that an outlay of twopence on a telephone call to Heath House could not be considered an unjustifiable extravagance. I was conscious of a certain curiosity to learn at long range what had happened after I had removed myself on the previous afternoon.

"Are you there?" said a grave voice in answer to my ring.

"Is that Barter?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Mr. Corcoran. I want to speak to Mr. Ukridge."

"Mr. Ukridge is no longer here, sir. He left perhaps an hour ago."

"Oh? Do you mean left—er—for ever?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh! Thanks."

I rang off and, pondering deeply, returned to my rooms. I was not surprised to be informed by Bowles, my landlord, that Ukridge was in my sitting-room. It was this storm-tossed man's practice in times of stress to seek refuge with me.

"Hullo, laddie," said Ukridge in a graveyard voice.

"So here you are."

"Here I am."

"She kicked you out?"

Ukridge winced slightly, as at some painful recollection.

"Words passed, old horse, and in the end we decided that we were better apart."

"I don't see why she should blame you for what happened."

"A woman like my aunt, Corky, is capable of blaming anybody for anything. And so I start life again, laddie, a penniless man, with no weapons against the great world but my vision and my brain."

I endeavoured to attract his attention to the silver lining.

"You're all right," I said. "You're just where you wanted to be. You have the money which your buttercup girl collected."

A strong spasm shook my poor friend, causing, as always happened with him in moments of mental agony, his collar to shoot off its stud and his glasses to fall from his nose.

"The money that girl collected," he replied, "is not available. It has passed away. I saw her this morning and she told me."

"Told you what?"

"That a curate came up to her in the garden while she was selling those buttercups and—in spite of a strong stammer—put it to her so eloquently that she was obtaining money under false pretences that she gave him the entire takings for his Church Expenses Fund and went home, resolved to lead a better life. Women are an unstable, emotional sex, laddie. Have as little to do with them as possible. And, for the moment, give me a drink, old horse, and mix it fairly strong. These are the times that try men's souls.'

9

Ukridge and the Old Stepper

"GORKY, old horse," said Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge in a stunned voice, "this is the most amazing thing I have heard in the whole course of my existence. I'm astounded. You could knock me down with a feather."

"I wish I had one."

"This suit?—this shabby, worn-out suit?—you don't really mean to stand there and tell me that you actually *wanted* this ragged, seedy, battered old suit? Why, upon my honest Sam, when I came on it while rummaging through your belongings yesterday, I thought it was just something you had discarded years ago and forgotten to give to the deserving poor."

I spoke my mind. Any unbiased judge would have admitted that I had cause for warmth. Spring, coming to London in a burst of golden sunshine, was calling imperiously to all young men to rejoice in their youth, to put on their new herringbone-pattern lounge suits and go out and give the populace an eyeful; and this I had been prevented from doing by the fact that my new suit had mysteriously disappeared.

After a separation of twenty-four hours, I had just met it in Piccadilly with Ukridge inside it.

I continued to speak, and was beginning to achieve a certain eloquence, when from a taxi-cab beside us there alighted a small, dapper old gentleman, who might have been a duke or one of the better-class ambassadors or something of that sort. He wore a pointed white beard, a silk hat, lavender spats, an Ascot tie, and, a gardenia; and if anyone had told me that such a man could have even a nodding acquaintance with S. F. Ukridge, I should have laughed hollowly. Furthermore, if I had been informed that Ukridge, warmly greeted by such a man, would have ignored him and passed coldly on, I should have declined to believe it.

Nevertheless, both these miracles happened.

"Stanley!" cried the old gentleman. "Bless my soul, I haven't seen you for years." And he spoke, what is more, as if he regretted

the fact, not as if he had had a bit of luck that made my mouth water. "Come and have some lunch, my dear boy."

"Corky," said Ukridge, eyeing him stonily for a moment and speaking in a low, strained voice, "let us be getting along."

"But did you hear him?" I gasped, as he hurried me away. "He asked you to lunch."

"I heard him. Corky, old boy," said Ukridge gravely, "I'll tell you. That bloke is best avoided."

"Who is he?"

"An uncle of mine."

"But he seemed respectable."

"That is to say, a step-uncle. Or would you call him step-step? He married my late step-mother's step-sister. I'm not half sure," said Ukridge, pondering, "that step-step-step wouldn't be the correct description."

These were deep waters, into which I was not prepared to plunge.

"But what did you want to cut him for?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you at lunch."

I raised a passionate hand.

"If you think that after pinching my spring suiting you're going to get so much as a crust of bread——"

"Calm yourself, laddie. You're lunching with me. Largely on the strength of this suit, I managed to get past the outer defences of the Foreign Office just now and touch old George Tupper for a fiver. Joy will be unconfined."

"Corky," said Ukridge thoughtfully, spreading caviare on a piece of toast in the Regent grill-room some ten minutes later, "do you ever brood on what might have been?"

"I'm doing it now. I might have been wearing that suit."

"There is no need to go into that again," said Ukridge, with dignity. "I have explained that little misunderstanding—explained it fully. What I mean is, do you ever brood on the inscrutable workings of Fate and reflect how, but for this or that, you might have been—well, that or this? For instance, but for the old Stepper I would by now be the mainstay of a vast business, and in all probability happily married to a charming girl and the father of half a dozen prattling children."

"In which case, if there is anything in heredity, I should have had to keep my spring suits in a Safe Deposit."

"Corky, old horse," said Ukridge, pained, "you keep harping on this beastly suit of yours. It shows an ungracious spirit which I do not like to see. What was I saying?"

"You were babbling about Fate."

"Ah, yes."

Fate (said Ukridge) is odd. Rummy. You can't say it isn't. Lots of people have noticed it. And one of the rummiest things about it is the way it seems to take a delight in patting you on the head and lulling you into security and then suddenly steering your foot on to the banana-skin. Just when things appear to be going smoothest, bang comes the spanner into the machinery and there you are.

Take this business I'm going to tell you about. Just before it happened, I had begun to look upon myself as Fortune's favourite child. Everything was breaking right in the most astounding fashion. My Aunt Julia, having sailed for America on one of her lecturing tours, had lent me her cottage at Market Deeping in Sussex till her return, with instructions to the local tradesmen to let me have the necessaries of life and chalk them up to her. From some source which at the moment I cannot recollect, I had snaffled two pairs of white flannel trousers and a tennis racket. And finally, after a rather painful scene in the course of which I was compelled to allude to him as a pig-headed bureaucrat, I had contrived to get a couple of quid out of old Tuppy. My position was solid. I ought to have known that luck like that couldn't last.

Now, in a parting conversation on the platform at Waterloo while waiting for the boat-train to start, Aunt Julia had revealed the fact that her motive in sticking me down at her cottage had not been simply to ensure that I had a pleasant summer. It seemed that at Deeping Hall, the big house of the locality, there resided a certain Sir Edward Bayliss, O.B.E., a bird deeply immersed in the jute industry. To this day I have never quite got it clear what jute really is, but, anyway, this Sir Edward was a man to keep in with, for his business had ramifications everywhere and endless openings for the bright young beginner. He was, moreover, a great admirer of my aunt's novels, and she told me in a few and, in parts, tactless words that what I was going down there for was to ingratiate myself with him and land a job. Which, she said—and this was where I thought her remarks lacked taste—would give me a chance of doing something useful

and ceasing to be what she called a wastrel and an idler.

Idler! I'll trouble you! As if for a single day in my life, Corky, I have ever not buzzed about doing the work of ten men. Why, take the mere getting of that couple of quid from old Tuppy, for instance. Simple as it sounds, I doubt if Napoleon could have done it. Tuppy, sterling fellow though he is, has his bad mornings. He comes down to the office and finds a sharp note from the President of Uruguay or someone on his desk, and it curdles the milk of human kindness within him. On these occasions he becomes so tight that he could carry an armful of eels up five flights of stairs and not drop one. And yet in less than a quarter of an hour I had got a couple of quid out of him.

Oh, well, women say these things.

Well, I packed a suit-case and took the next train down to Market Deeping. And the first thing for you to do, Corky, before I go on, is to visualize the general lay-out of the place. My aunt's cottage (Journey's End) was here, where this bit of bread is. Here, next to it, where I've put the potato, was a smallish house (Pondicherry) belonging to Colonel Bayliss, the jute-fancier's brother. The gardens adjoined, but anything in the way of neighbourly fraternizing was prevented for the moment by the fact that the Colonel was away—at Harrogate, I learned later, trying to teach his liver to take a joke. All this expanse here—I'll mark it with a splash of Worcester Sauce—was the park of Deeping Hall, beyond which was the Hall itself and all the gardens, messuages, pleasaunces, and so forth that you'd expect.

Got it now? Right.

Well, as you can see from the diagram, the park of the Hall abutted—if that's the word I want—on the back garden of my cottage; and judge of my emotions when, as I smoked an after-breakfast pipe under the trees on the first morning after my arrival, I saw the most extraordinarily pretty girl riding there. Hither and thither. She came so close once that I could have hit her with an apple. Not that I did, of course.

I don't know if you have ever been in love at first sight, Corky? One moment I was looking idly through the hedge to see where the hoof-beats came from; the next I was electrified from head to foot, and in the bushes around me a million birds had begun to toot. I gathered at once that this must be the O.B.E.'s daughter, or something on those lines, and I found my whole attitude towards the jute business, which up till now had been what you

might call lukewarm, changing in a flash. It didn't take me more than a second to realize that a job involving a connection with this girl was practically the ideal one.

I called at the Hall that afternoon, mentioned my name, and from the very start everything went like a breeze.

I don't want to boast, Corky—and, of course, I'm speaking now of some years ago, before Life had furrowed my brow and given my eyes that haunted look—but I may tell you frankly that at the time when these things happened I was a rather dazzling spectacle. I had just had my hair cut and the flannel bags fitted me to a nicety, and altogether I was an asset—yes, old horse, a positive asset to any social circle. The days flew by. The O.B.E. was chummy. The girl—her name was Myrtle, and I think she had found life at Market Deeping a bit on the slow side till I arrived—always seemed glad to see me. I was the petted young neighbour.

And then one afternoon in walked the Stepper.

There have been occasions in my life, Corky, when, if I had seen a strange man walking up the path to the front door of the house where I was living, I should have ducked through the back premises and remained concealed in the raspberry bushes till he had blown over. But it so happened that at this time my financial affairs were on a sound and solid basis and I hadn't a single creditor in the world. So I went down and opened the door and found him beaming on the mat.

"Stanley Ukridge?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I called at your aunt's house at Wimbledon the other day and they told me you were here. I'm your Uncle Percy from Australia, my boy. I married your late step-mother's step-sister Alice."

I don't suppose anybody with a pointed white beard has ever received a heartier welcome. I don't know if you have any pet day-dream, Corky, but mine had always been the sudden appearance of the rich uncle from Australia you read so much about in novels. The old-fashioned novels, I mean, the ones where the hero isn't a dope-fiend. And here he was, looking as I had always expected him to look. You saw his spats just now, you observed his gardenia. Well, on the afternoon of which I'm speaking, he was just as spatted, fully as gardenia-ed, and in addition wore in his tie something that looked like a miniature Koh-i-noor.

"Well, well, well!" I said.

"Well, well, well!" he said.

He patted my back. I patted his. He said he was a lonely old man who had come back to England to spend his declining years with some congenial relative. I said I was just as keen on finding uncles as he was on spotting nephews. The thing was a love-feast.

"You can put me up for a week or two, Stanley?"

"Delighted."

"Nice little place you have here."

"Glad you like it."

"Wants a bit of smartening up, though," said the Stepper, looking round at the appointments and not seeming to think a lot of them. Aunt Julia had furnished the cottage fairly sparsely.

"Perhaps you're right."

"Some comfortable chairs, eh?"

"Fine."

"And a sofa."

"Splendid."

"And perhaps a nice little summer-house for the garden. Have you a summer-house?"

I said: "No, no summer-house."

"I'll be looking about for one," said the Stepper.

And everything I had read about rich uncles from Australia seemed to me to have come true. Spacious is the only word to describe his attitude. He was like some Eastern monarch giving the Court architect specifications for a new palace. This, I told myself, was how these fine, breezy, Empire-building fellows always were—generous, open-handed, gaily reckless of expense. I wished I had met him earlier.

"And now, my boy," said the old Stepper, sticking out from six to eight inches of tongue and running same round his lips, "where do you keep the drinks?"

I've always maintained, and I always will maintain, that there's nothing in this world to beat a real bachelor establishment. Men have a knack of making themselves comfortable which few women ever can achieve. My Aunt Julia's idea of a chair, for instance, was something antique made to the order of the Spanish Inquisition. The Stepper had the right conception. Men arrived in vans and unloaded things with slanting backs and cushioned

seats, and whenever I wasn't over at the Hall I wallowed in these.

The Stepper wallowed in them all the time. Occasionally he put in an hour or so in the summer-house—for he had caused a summer-house to appear at the bottom of the garden—but mostly you would find him indoors with all the windows shut and something to drink at his elbow. He said he had had so much fresh air in Australia that what he wanted now was something he could scoop out with a spoon.

Once or twice I tried to get him over to the Hall, but he would have none of it. He said from what he knew of O.B.E.s he wouldn't be allowed to take his boots off, and ran, moreover, a grave risk of being offered barley-water. Apparently he had once met a teetotal O.B.E. in Sydney and was prejudiced. However, he was most sympathetic when I told him about Myrtle. He said that, though he wasn't any too keen on matrimony as an institution, he was broad-minded enough to realize that there might quite possibly be women in the world unlike his late wife. Concerning whom, he added that the rabbit was not, as had been generally stated, Australia's worst pest.

"Tell me of this girl, my boy," he said. "You squeeze her a good deal in dark corners, no doubt?"

"Certainly not," I said, stiffly.

"Then things have changed very much since my young days. What do you do?"

I said I looked at her quite a lot and hung on her every word and all that sort of thing.

"Do you give her presents?"

He had touched on a subject which I had intended to bring up myself when I could find an opening. You see, Myrtle's birthday was approaching; and, though nothing had actually been said about any little gift, I had sensed a certain expectation in the air. Even the best of girls are like that, Corky. They say how old they feel with another birthday coming along so soon, and then they look brightly at you.

"Well, as a matter of fact, Uncle Percy," I said, flicking a speck of dust off his sleeve, "I was rather planning something of the kind, if only I could see my way to managing it. It's her birthday next week, Uncle Percy, and it crossed my mind that if I could stumble on somebody who could slip me a few quid, something might possibly be done about it, Uncle Percy."

He waved his hand in an Australian sort of way.

"Leave it all to me, my boy."

"Oh, no, really!"

"I insist."

"Oh, if you insist."

"My late wife was your late step-mother's step-sister, and blood is thicker than water. Now, let me see," mused the old Stepper, wriggling his feet a couple of inches farther on to the table and knitting the brow a bit. "What shall it be? Jewellery? No. Girls like their little bit of jewellery, but perhaps it would scarcely do. I have it. A sundial."

"A what?" I said.

"A sundial," said the old Stepper. "What could be a more pretty and tasteful gift? No doubt she has a little garden of her own, some sequestered nook which she tends with her own hands and where she wanders in maiden meditation on summer evenings If so, she needs a sundial."

"But, Uncle Percy," I said doubtfully, "do you really think ——? My idea was rather that if you could possibly let me have a fiver—or say a tenner—to make up the round sum——"

"She draws a sundial," said the old Stepper firmly, "and likes it."

I tried to reason with the man.

"But you can't get a sundial," I urged.

"I can get a sundial," said the old Stepper, waving his whisky and soda with a good deal of asperity. I can get anything. Sundials, summer-houses, elephants if you want them. I'm noted for it. Show me the man who says that Charles Percy Cuthbertson can't get a sundial, and I'll give him the lie in his teeth. That's where I'll give it him. In his teeth!"

And, as he seemed to be warming up a bit, we left it at that. I never dreamed that he would make good, of course. You'll admit, I think, Corky, that I'm a pretty gifted fellow, but if anyone called upon me at practically a moment's notice to produce a sundial, I should be nonplussed. Nevertheless, bright and early on the morning of Myrtle's birthday I heard a yodel under my window, and there he was, standing beside a wheel-barrow containing sundial complete as per invoice. It all seemed to me more like magic than anything, and I began to feel like Aladdin. Apparently my job from now on was simply to rub the lamp and the Stepper would do the rest.

"There you are, my boy," he said, dusting the thing off with a handkerchief and regarding it in a fatherly sort of way. "You give the little lady that and she'll let you cuddle her behind the front door."

This struck a slightly jarring note, of course. He seemed to me to be taking an entirely too earthy view of my great love, which was intensely spiritual. But it was not the moment to say so.

"That'll make her clap her hands prettily. That'll send her singing about the house."

"She ought to like it," I agreed.

"Of course she'll like it. She'd damn' well better like it. Show me a wholesome, sweet-minded English girl who doesn't like a sundial and I'll paste her on the nose," said the Stepper warmly. "Why, it's got a motto and everything."

And so it had. We hadn't spotted it at first, the contrivance having been more or less covered with moss; but the Stepper had worked briskly with a table-knife and now you got a good view of it. Some rot, if I recollect rightly, about ye sunne and ye shoures, carved in old English letters. It seemed to alter the whole aspect of the sundial—lift it, as it were, into a higher and more dignified class; and for the first time I began to get really enthusiastic.

"This is the goods, Uncle Percy," I said. "This is the right stuff. How can I thank you enough?"

"You can't," said the Stepper.

"I'll tell you what the procedure here is," I said. "I'll take this thing over to the Hall this morning and ask Myrtle and her father to come to tea. They can't refuse when they've just been handed a sundial like this."

"Certainly," said the Stepper. "A very good idea. Ask them here to tea, and I'll make the house a bower of roses."

"Can you get roses?"

"Can I get roses! Don't keep asking me if I can get things. Of course I can get roses. And eggs, too."

"We shan't want eggs."

"We shall want eggs," said the Stepper, beginning to hot up again. "If eggs are good enough for me, they're good enough for the pop-eyed daughter of a blighted O.B.E. Or don't you think so?"

"Oh, quite, Uncle Percy, quite," I said.

I would have liked to inform him that Myrtle wasn't pop-eyed' but he didn't seem in the mood.

Any doubts I may have had as to the acceptability of my birthday present vanished as soon as, with infinite sweat, I had wheeled it across the park in its barrow. The Stepper had had the right idea. Myrtle was all over the sundial. I sprang the tea invitation, and for the moment it looked as if there was going to be a hitch. Her Uncle Philip, the Colonel, it seemed, was due to materialize that afternoon. He always made a point of being present for his niece's birthday, however far he had to come to be there, and he would be terribly hurt if he arrived and found she had let him down. What to do?

"Bring him along," I said, of course. And we arranged it on those lines. The Colonel, on getting off the train and going to the Hall, would find a note instructing him to hoof it across the park and come and revel at Journey's End. I didn't say so to Myrtle, for the time did not seem to me ripe, but what it amounted to, I felt, was that the Colonel, would come seeking a niece and would find in addition a nephew. Than which, for a bloke getting on in years and needing all the loved ones round him that could be assembled, what could be a jollier surprise? I disagree with you, Corky. It does not depend on the kind of nephew. Any nephew is a boon to a lonely bachelor like that.

So I wheeled the wheelbarrow back to the cottage, feeling that all was well. And at about half-past four the maid who came in from the village by the day to do our cooking and washing-up announced Sir Edward and Miss Bayliss.

I'm an old campaigner now, Corky, and Fate has to take its coat off and spit on its hands a bit if it wants to fool me. To-day, when Fate offers me something apparently gilt-edged, I look it over coldly and assume, till it has been proved otherwise, that attached to it somewhere there is a string. But at the time of which I am speaking I was younger, more buoyant, more credulous; and I honestly supposed that this tea-party of mine was going to be the success it seemed at the start.

The thing had got under way without a suspicion of anything in the nature of a disaster. In the first place, the maid had responded to my coaching in the most admirable manner. A simple child of the soil, her natural disposition would have been to bung the door open and bellow: "They're here!" Instead of which, she

had done the announcing with a style and polish that gave the whole proceedings a tone from the very outset. Secondly, Sir Edward had not bumped his head against the beam on the ceiling just inside the front door. And, lastly, though the Stepper's roses were present in wonderful profusion, he himself hadn't shown up. And that seemed to me the biggest stroke of luck of the lot.

You see, the old Stepper wasn't everybody's money. To begin with, he had an apparently incurable dislike of O.B.E.'s, and then he combined with a hot-blooded and imperious nature the odd belief that eggs were a suitable food for adult human beings at five o'clock in the afternoon. And he was so touchy, too, so ready to resent opposition. I had had visions of him standing over Sir Edward and shoving eggs down his throat at the point of a table-knife. He was better away, and I hoped he had fallen into a ditch and couldn't get out.

From the moment the first drop of tea was poured everything went as smooth as oil. In recent years, Corky, affairs have so shaped themselves that you have had the opportunity of seeing me mainly in the capacity of a guest; but you can take it from me that, vouchsafed the right conditions, I can be a very sparkling host. Give me a roof over my head, plenty of buttered toast, and no creditors in sight, and I shine with the best of them.

On the present occasion I was at the top of my form. I handed cups. I slid the toast about. I prattled merrily. And I could see the old boy was impressed. These O.B.E.'s are silent, reserved men, and for a while he just looked at me from time to time in a meditative way. Then, as he was dipping into his third cup of tea, out he came into the open and began to talk turkey.

"Your aunt . . . Have you heard from her, by the way?"

"Not yet. I suppose she's very busy."

"I imagine so. An energetic woman."

"Very. All we Ukridges are energetic. We do not spare ourselves."

"Your aunt," resumed the old boy, swallowing some more tea, "gave me the impression in one of the conversations we had before she left England that you were looking out for an opening in the world of commerce."

"Yes," I said. I stroked my chin thoughtfully and tried to look as much as possible like Charles M. Schwab being approached by the President of the United States Steel Corporation with a view to a merger. You've got to show these birds that you've a

proper sense of your own value. Start right with them, or it's no use starting at all. "I might accept commercial employment if the salary and prospects were undeniable."

He cleared his throat.

"In my own business," he was beginning, "the jute business—"

Just then the door opened and the maid appeared. She was one of those snorting girls, and she snorted something about a gentleman. I couldn't get it.

"Who's a gentleman?" I said.

"Outside. He says he wants to see you."

"It must be Uncle Philip," said Myrtle.

"Of course," I said. "Show him in. Don't keep him waiting, my good girl. Show him in at once."

And a moment later in came a bloke. Obviously not the Colonel, for Myrtle and the O.B.E. gave no sign of recognition. Then who? The man was a perfect stranger to me.

However, I played the host.

"Good afternoon," I said, affably.

"Afternoon," said the bloke.

"Take a chair," I said.

"I'm going to take all the chairs," he said. "And the sofa, too. I'm from the Mammoth Furnishing Company, and the cheque for the deposit on this stuff has been returned Refer to Drawer."

It is not too much to say, Corky, that I reeled.Yes, laddie, your old friend tottered and would have fallen had he not clutched at a chair. And, from the look in the bloke's eye, it began to seem that my chances of clutching at that particular chair were likely to be very soon a thing of the past. He had one of those brooding eyes. Two, probably, only there was a patch over the left one. I think someone must have hit him there. A fellow like that could scarcely go through life without getting punched in the eye.

"But, my dear old horse——" I began.

"It's no use arguing. We've written twice and never got an answer, and I've instructions from the firm to take the stuff."

"But we're using it."

"Not now," said the blighter. "You've finished."

I look back on that moment, Corky, old boy, as one of the worst in my career. It is always a nervous business for a fellow to entertain for the first time the girl he loves and her father; and, believe me, it doesn't help pass things off when a couple of the proletariat in shirt-sleeves surge into the room and start carrying

out all the chairs. Conversation during the proceedings was, you might say, at a standstill; and even after the operations were over it wasn't any too easy to get it going again.

"Some absurd mistake," I said.

"No doubt," said the O.B.E.

"I shall write those people a very stiff letter to-night."

"No doubt."

"That furniture was bought by my uncle, one of the wealthiest men in Australia. It's absurd to suppose that a man of his standing would——"

"No doubt. Myrtle, my dear, I think we will be going."

Then, Corky, I spread myself. On not a few occasions in a life that has had its ups and downs I have been compelled to do some impressive talking, but now I surpassed all previous efforts. The thought of all that was slipping away from me spurred me to heights I have never reached before or since. And gradually, little by little, I made headway. The old boy tried to shake me off and edge through the french windows, but it is pretty hard to shake me off when I am at my best. I grabbed him by the buttonhole and steered him back into the room. And when, in a dazed sort of way, he reached out and took a slice of cake, I knew the battle was won.

"The way I look at it is this," I said, getting between him and the window. "A man like my uncle would no doubt have a number of accounts in different banks. The one on which he drew this cheque happened to have insufficient funds in it, and the bank-manager, with gross discourtesy——"

"Well, yes, possibly——"

"I shall tell my uncle of what has occurred——"

At this moment somebody behind me said "Ha!" or it may have been "Ho!" and I spun round, and there in the french window was standing another perfect stranger.

This new addition to our little party was a long, lean, Anglo-Indian-looking individual. You know the type. Beige as to general colour-scheme and rather like a vulture with a white moustache.

"Uncle Philip!" cried Myrtle.

The Vulture gave a kind of nod in her direction. He seemed upset about something.

"Don't talk to me," he said. "I haven't time. Many happy returns of the day and so forth, but don't talk to me now, child. There's the man I want to talk to."

"You know Mr. Ukridge?"

"No, I don't. And I don't want to. But I know he's stolen——" He broke off with a hideous rattle in his voice, and I saw that he was staring at the table. It belonged to my aunt and was the only thing in the room that the shirt-sleeved birds had left, so it was fairly conspicuous. "Good God!" he said.

He switched an eye round and let it play on me like an oxy-acetylene blowpipe. I don't know what the treatment for liver is at Harrogate, but they ought to change it. It's ineffective. It had obviously done this man no good at all.

"Good God!" he said again.

The O.B.E. came to the surface.

"What's the matter, Philip?" he asked, annoyed. He had only just finished coughing, having swallowed a bit of cake the wrong way.

"I'll tell you what's the matter. I was in my garden just now, and I found it looted—looted! That man there has stripped it of every rose I possess. My roses! The place is a desert."

"Is this true, Mr. Ukridge?" asked the O.B.E.

"Certainly not," I said.

"Oh, it isn't?" said the Vulture. "It isn't, eh? Then where did those roses come from? There aren't any rose-trees in the garden of this house. Damn it, I've been here half a dozen times and I ought to know. Where did you get those roses? Answer me that."

"My uncle gave them to me."

The O.B.E. having now disposed of the cake, uttered a nasty laugh.

"Your uncle!" he said.

"What uncle?" cried the Vulture. "Where's this uncle? Show me this uncle. Produce him."

"I'm afraid it would be a little difficult to do that, Philip," said the O.B.E., and I didn't at all like his manner. "It appears that Mr. Ukridge possesses a mysterious uncle. Nobody has ever set eyes on him, but it would seem that he buys furniture and does not pay for it; steals roses——"

"And sundials," put in the Vulture.

"Sundials?"

"That's what I said. After I'd had a look at my garden I went over to the Hall, and there in the middle of the lawn was my sundial. They told me this fellow here had given it to Myrtle."

I wasn't in any too good shape by this time, but I collected enough of the old manly spirit to come back at him.

"How do you know it was your sundial?" I said.

"Because it had my motto on it. And, as if that wasn't enough, he's stolen my summer-house."

The O.B.E. gulped.

"Your summer-house?" he said in a low, almost reverent voice. The spaciousness of the thing seemed to have affected his vocal chords. "How could he have stolen a summer-house?"

"I don't know how he did it. In sections, I suppose. It's one of those portable summer-houses. I had it sent down from the Stores last month. And there it is, standing at the bottom of his garden. I tell you the man ought not to be at large. He's a menace. Good God! When I was in Africa during the Boer War a platoon of Australians scrounged one of my cast-iron sheds one night, but I never expected that that sort of thing happened in England in peace-time."

Corky, a sudden bright light shone on me. I saw all. It was that word "scrounge" that did it. I remembered now having heard of Australia and its scroungers. They go about pinching things, Corky—— No, I do *not* mean spring suits, I mean things that really matter, things of vital import like sundials and summer-houses—not beastly spring suits which nobody could tell you wanted, anyway, and you'll get it back to-morrow as good as new.

Well, be that as it may, I saw all.

"Sir Edward," I said, "let me explain. My uncle——"

But it was no use, Corky. They wouldn't listen. The O.B.E. gave me one look, the Vulture gave me another, and I rather fancy Myrtle gave me a third, and then they pushed off and I was alone.

I went over to the table and helped myself to a bit of cold buttered toast, a broken man.

About ten minutes later there was a sound of cheery whistling outside and the Stepper walked in.

"Here I am, my boy," said the Stepper. "I've got the eggs." And he began shedding them out of every pocket. It looked as if he had been looting every henroost in the neighbourhood. "Where are out guests?"

Gone."

"Gone?"

He looked round.

"Hullo! Where's the furniture?"

"Gone."

"Gone?"

I explained.

"Tut, tut!" said the Stepper.

I sniffed a bit.

"Don't make sniffing noises at me, my boy," said the Stepper reprovingly. "The best of men have cheques returned from time to time."

"And I suppose the best of men sneak eggs and roses and sundials and summer-houses?" I said. And I spoke bitterly, Corky.

"Eh?" said the Stepper. "You don't mean to say——?"

"I certainly do."

"Tell me all."

I told him all.

"Too bad!" he said. "I never have been able to shake off this habit of scrounging. Wherever Charles Percy Cuthbertson is, there he scrounges. But who would have supposed that people would make a fuss about a little thing like that? I'm disappointed in the old country. Why, nobody in Australia minds a little scrounging. What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine—that's our motto out there. All this to-do about a sundial and a summer-house! Why, bless my soul, I've scrounged a tennis lawn in my time. Oh, well, there's nothing to be done about it, I suppose."

"There's a lot to be done about it," I said. "The O.B.E. doesn't believe I've got an uncle. He thinks I pinched all those things myself."

"Does he?" said the Stepper thoughtfully. "Does he, indeed?"

"And the least you can do is to go up to the Hall and explain."

"Precisely what I was about to suggest myself. I'll walk over now and put everything right. Trust me, my boy. I'll soon fix things up."

And he trotted out, and that, Corky, is the last I ever saw of him till to-day. It's my belief he never went anywhere near the Hall. I am convinced that he walked straight to the station, no doubt pocketing a couple of telegraph poles and a five-barred gate or so on the way, and took the next train to London. Certainly there was nothing in the O.B.E.'s manner when I met him next day in the village to suggest that everything had been put right and things fixed up. I don't suppose a jute merchant has ever cut anybody so thoroughly.

And that's why I wish to impress it upon you, Corky, old horse, that that bloke, that snaky and conscienceless old Stepper, is best avoided. No matter how glittering the prospects he may hold out, I say to you—shun him! Looking at the thing in one way, taking the short, narrow view, I am out a lunch. Possibly a very good lunch. But do I regret? No. Who knows but that a man like that would have been called to the telephone at the eleventh hour, leaving me stuck with the bill?

And even supposing he really has got money now. How did he get it? That is the question. I shall make inquiries, and if I find that someone has pinched the Albert Memorial I shall know what to think.

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